

THE
LAST
WITCH

II

M.J.LAWRIE

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For all the awesome mums out there. Especially my mother in-law, my step-mum, and my sister.

Thank you for all your support, ladies.

THE LAST WITCH

VOLUME TWO

M. J. LAWRIE

'Come with me. I can take such good care of you. No one will ever hurt you again.'

He waits. His eyes never leave me. His smile doesn't falter for a second and his confidence and authority fills the air. I can almost taste it. But Grayson's sweet words aren't done.

'We can keep you safe,' he promises me. 'There will be no more bars on your window. No more chains around your wrists. You will never go hungry. No one will strike you. There is nowhere safer than with me. You will be Free.'

'I'll be Free?' I ask in a stunned whisper.

'Yes, Lilly Hooper. You will be completely free.'

'STOP IT!' I scream, pulling against Hendrix and his impossibly tight grip. I claw at his hands. I pull and yank. I screech as desperate and hate-filled tears stream down my cheeks and blood drips down my chin. 'STOP! PLEASE! FOR GOD'S SAKE, GRAYSON! STOP HURTING HER!'

Amara continues to writhe and judder in Grayson's arms as he releases his lightning into her body. He stares at me almost bored as he tortures my best friend in front of me. His blue lightning erupts from his hands in short and sharp bursts, making sure the pain Amara suffers is fresh and new.

And I'm powerless to stop him.

I curl up my fist and hit Hendrix's arm over and over. Each impact makes the crisp white bandage protecting the stumps where up until two days ago my fingers were, slowly start to turn red. I know I've ripped my stitches. It's excruciating. But my desperation to get free and stop Amara's torture outweighs the pain a hundred times over.

Hendrix just laughs at my feeble attempts to inflict any form of real pain on him.

'I'll ask you again, Miss Hooper. Are. You. Ready?' Grayson asks, with his eyebrows raised and his lips in a tight line. He has Amara's arms pinned across her chest. Another sharp blast of his lightning shoots through her body before I can even respond. But this time, he doesn't stop. It carries on.

And on. And on!

Her screams get louder, higher and more desperate.

'Waiting for an answer, Miss Hooper,' Grayson calls out over her cries of agony. Her eyes start to roll back into her head. My attempts

to get free of the vampire turn feral. My fingernails claw at his face and draw blood. Hendrix grunts before spinning me around and giving me a backhand, splitting my lip. He doesn't let me go, but grips my shoulders tighter and continues forcing me to watch on helplessly.

The door to Grayson's office smashes open. Splinters of wood explode over us all, and Collins charges into the room. He sees Amara. He sees me, and the hate-filled look he throws at Grayson is terrifying.

'Get your fucking hands off-'

With a simple swipe of his hand, Grayson sends Collins to the wall with such force it cracks the plaster and sends the portrait above his head crashing to the floor. But Collins is back up and ready to charge in a matter of seconds. Only to get slammed once more into the wall. Hendrix wraps his grubby fingers over my brand and squeezes.

I howl and crumple to my knees, fighting the urge to vomit or pass out as the burnt flesh feels once more alight.

Grayson stops his torture. Amara slumps in his arms, her hair falls over her face as she sobs. He doesn't let her go, but simply looks at Collins, daring him to take another step.

'If you make another move,' Grayson warns him in an eerie calm. 'I'll send my lightning through Amara's body so it shatters her bones, tears her muscles and pops her pretty eyes like water balloons.'

I'm on my knees with my mutilated arm being crushed by Hendrix. I'm trying so hard not to scream from the unbelievable pain, and Amara, sweet Amara, quietly sobs in the devil's arms.

Collins can't help it. His compulsion to protect Amara and get her away from Grayson is too strong. Stronger than his sense of reason. He goes to get to his feet.

'DON'T!' I plead. 'Collins... Please, don't. You'll only make it worse.'

'Finally,' Grayson sighs, a condescending turn appearing on his lips. 'You've said something sensible.' And with that, he drops Amara like a sack of rocks at his feet. I flood with relief. She rolls onto her back and her big, tear-filled eyes land straight on me.

Grayson steps over her and slowly, purposefully, makes his way towards me. My relief is quickly overridden by apprehension. Hendrix lets me go and steps back. Grayson's footsteps echo all around us. No one says a word or moves an inch. On my knees and cradling my arm, I look up at him. He straightens his cufflinks as he gets closer, that confident and cruel smile hitching the corners of his mouth. His dark eyes look into mine with triumphant joy.

He has the most powerful witch in the world on her knees at his feet.

And that makes him very happy.

Crouching down, he runs his finger gently along my jaw. I know that if I pull away from his touch, more pain will follow for all of us.

So I let him touch me. The feeling of his skin caressing mine is hot and searing. The same as it always is when unwanted hands touch me. His most of all.

‘Do we have to go through this again?’ he asks me sweetly. His focus lingers on my mouth and with his thumb, he catches a bead of blood. I look at him with such contempt. I’m shaking with it. ‘I thought I was very clear on how I expected you to behave when I branded you and brought you to heel back at the barn.’

‘I’m doing everything-’

‘Shall I go upstairs? Hmm?’ he asks. ‘Go and check on Gabriel? Perhaps I’ll do to him, what my father did to you and your lovely fingers.’

He stands and makes for the door, ready to carry out his threat. I grab his wrist to stop him. ‘No. No, don’t. Please, leave him alone?’ I ask, desperation shaking my voice.

He takes my hand, leans down and kisses my knuckles. I hate that I have no choice but to let him.

‘Let me remind you, Miss Hooper.’ He keeps hold of my hand and gives Amara and Collins a quick look, making sure that they’re listening too. ‘Let me remind you all of the way it works in this house. In *my* house.’ I’m yanked to my feet and shaken. ‘Until the Veil is down, the Arcane is mine. Her magic is under *my* control. She does as *I* say, when *I* say it. And she does it with a pretty smile on her face. If she does not, one of you will pay the price. And you...’ Grayson points at Amara and Collins with his free hand, anger piercing his calm composure ever so slightly as his grip on my wrist increases. ‘You will fall into line and do as you are told. I am your Coven Leader, and I will have the respect that title demands. If you do not obey me, Lilly will pay the price.’ He releases a burst of lightning which shoots straight down my arm. I clench my teeth down hard and refuse to let out any noise whatsoever.

My silence is not what he wants.

So he makes it stronger.

Only when I scream does he stop.

‘I own every single one of you,’ Grayson states plainly. ‘I always have. And I always will. I shall do anything to finish the mission we started five-centuries ago. Magic will return. And you will all do as I say, when I say it, or I will hurt the people that you love. Am I clear?’

He gets nothing but silence and loathing from all three of us.

‘AM I CLEAR?’ he roars, letting loose his lightning on my skin once more and twisting my wrist back, making me yell.

‘Yes!’ Amara sobs desperately, forcing herself up onto her knees. ‘You’re clear, Grayson! We’ll do what you say. Stop! Please, let Lilly go. PLEASE!’

He looks at Collins.

‘And you?’ Grayson asks.

Collins is red in the face and rigid with fury. His fists are clenched at his sides and his teeth grind together.

‘He’s got it, Grayson,’ Amara pleads on his behalf, watching me as I suffer.

‘I’m afraid I need to hear it from him.’ Grayson looks straight at Collins. ‘Well?’

‘You’re tormenting the most powerful witch alive. When she gets her magic back from you, she’ll tear you apart,’ Collins warns. ‘And I’ll help her.’

‘You will, huh?’ Grayson laughs callously. ‘If you do, I’ll kill Amara before you can blink. I used my lightning on Amara, because Lilly said no to me when I asked her to do something. And because you just threatened me, Collins...’ He looks down at me still on the floor. ‘Lilly will pay the price for your words.’ He scrunches up his face and yanks my hand back hard. The snap echoes around the room and the scream I produce hurts my throat.

‘YOU FUCKING BASTARD!’ Collins bellows.

‘Do you understand now?’ Grayson questions. ‘Or shall I break another of her bones to *help* you to understand?’ The lightning continues to tear through my nerves as he snatches up my other wrist. I don’t think I can take much more. I’m going to pass out.

Amara looks desperately over to Collins. ‘TELL HIM!’ she screams, as I continue being tortured. ‘TELL HIM YOU UNDERSTAND NOW, OR WE ARE OVER!’

There’s an internal battle raging behind Collins’ eyes. He wants to rip Grayson’s head off. But he can’t. And he knows it.

Grayson lifts my wrist, his face scrunches once more as he prepares to snap another of my bones.

‘COLLINS!’ Amara screeches. ‘TELL HIM!’

‘I understand, Grayson,’ Collin concedes, through gritted teeth. ‘I’ll do as you instruct. Let her go.’

Still gripping my wrist threateningly, Grayson looks down at me. His lightning still shooting into my arm.

‘And you, Miss Hooper?’ he asks patiently. ‘Do you understand how this works? That your disobedience will mean someone else’s suffering?’

I nod and groan.

‘I’m sorry?’ He leans in, his ear going to my mouth. ‘I didn’t catch that.’

‘YES! I GOT IT!’ I scream. ‘STOP! PLEASE!’

The lightning ends. Grayson lets me go. I fall backwards, cradling my arm to my chest as he straightens his already perfectly straight

cufflinks.

‘Great,’ he says, happily. ‘I didn’t want it to turn out like this. But if you all refuse to do as instructed, I have no choice but to use violence and threats to keep you all in line. Now. Here’s what we are going to do, Miss Hooper. You and I are going to head outside to the big shiny van that I have had brought here for you. You will submit to any and all tests that the doctors inside that van wish to run on you. And you will do so politely and without complaint. Or your friends will all be very, very sorry. Do you understand?’

He holds out his hand and waits for me to take it.

‘I can’t have a child,’ I tell him, almost desperately. ‘Toby made sure of it. You’ve seen the marks on my stomach. You have an Arcane. I’m right here. I’m doing your spell. I’m doing everything you want. Isn’t that enough?’

‘If the tests come back, and you are infertile, then fine. I will let it go and focus on finding your cousin, Junior, instead. You and I will simply translate the journal, perform the spell to lower the Veil, and then you can all leave. You have my word. I will never darken your doorway again. But, if you *can* have a child, that child could very well be an Arcane. Only your bloodline has ever had access to all seven-realms of power and we cannot allow the extinction of your breed of witch. Arcane witches are essential in the survival of magic. If we lose them for good, we will not be strong enough to fight the enemies we must face. And unless we find your cousin, you are the only Hooper left. So, you and I-’

‘I will never carry your child,’ I snarl. ‘Never. I saw what you did to your own son all those years ago. You pushed him too far in the effort to get him to manifest magic and he died. And I saw what you did to Rose Hooper. How you locked her away for years and forced her to bear your children. I’ll kill myself before I let you anywhere near me.’

‘She’s with Gabriel!’ Collins barks. ‘Your own brother. They love each other. And while he’s upstairs, fighting for his life, you threaten and torture the woman he loves like this? How could you?’

Grayson holds out his hand and points it right at Amara. His lightning glimmers threateningly between his fingers. Collins shuffles and falls very quiet as he watches it.

‘Another word... I’ll send my lightning through Amara until her heart stops beating. That is your final warning. Understand?’ Grayson waits. Collins lowers his gaze and gives a small nod. ‘Sadly, Gabriel cannot have children, which leaves me the only suitable alternative. The Kendryk bloodline is superior to all others. Except for the Hooper bloodline, of course. Which is why it is so important that the two come together. So, what is it going to be, Miss Hooper? More pain? More blood? More tears? Or are we going to walk out to that van, do

what needs to be done and then after, you can return upstairs to your unconscious *boyfriend?*' He says the word like it tastes vile on his tongue. 'I'm waiting, Miss Hooper.' He stretches out his hand further, twitching his fingers for me to take them. 'Are you ready?'

'Toby did what he did because he had a vision. He saw me die, pregnant. Will you kill an Arcane simply to try and make another?' He crouches down once more and leans in close.

'He saw you die carrying *his* child. Not mine. So, like I said,' he whispers, his warm breath sending a shiver down my spine. 'I'll do whatever I can to make sure your bloodline lives on. I will not allow you to be the last Arcane Witch to walk this earth. And if you are able to have a child, then you will. I'll see to it. The bloodline, the magic, all that power, it cannot be lost. And since the man you have chosen to love is unable to have a child, it will be my child that you will carry.' There's a look of longing in his eyes as they settle on my belly. A glimpse of want and desire that's been there since the night we met. He doesn't care that I love his brother. And he certainly doesn't care that his brother loves me. Because in his twisted, fucked up way, Grayson loves me. He loves my magic. My power. And to him, that is all that matters.

'You will lower that Veil, return magic, and then we will have a baby. Stay with Gabriel if that's what you wish. I promised I wouldn't stop you. But I'm telling you now that if you can conceive, you will.'

'And I'm telling you, I'll get my magic back from you one day. And when I do, you'll know pain like never before.'

'You will never get the Bloodstone back from me. Never. And if you try, I will torture, maim and destroy everyone you love, my dear. If I even suspect a plot to take it from me, what has happened to you will happen to them. Ten times over. I will lock them up. Scar their bodies. Starve them. Beat them. Cut off their extremities and make them watch as the people they love suffer and die. Now, get off my floor and into that van before I break your legs and drag you out there by your hair.'



With half my face buried in his pillow, I lay and watch Gabriel's painfully still form. He still hasn't woken up from being shot two days ago. His chest rises and falls. His eyes move back and forth behind his closed lids as he dreams. The machine beside his head continues to steadily beep, letting me know that his heart, although it has a hole in it right now, is still beating. My fingers entwine with his, but no matter how tightly I hold them, he doesn't give me anything back. Not even a twitch.

My right arm is just pain. I feel nothing but hot, searing agony. The brand is far from healed, and my fingers were only sewn up a few hours ago. After hitting Hendrix, being grabbed and electrocuted, the pain is so much worse than it was. And my left hand is now in a cast from Grayson snapping my wrist.

I've had two fingers brutally removed with rusty plyers. On the very same arm, I have a brand that still feels hot to the touch. And I'm covered in so many cuts and bruises I can't tell who put which ones where anymore. I'm also stuck with the disturbing image of me on the floor of that horrible, dirty old barn, pleading with Toby not to do what he did.

He killed our baby.

My hands settle over my empty and scarred belly. The two large marks by my pelvis have suddenly become a source of hope.

Please, don't let me be able to carry a child.

I shuffle, trying to ease the discomfort between my legs from the invasive tests carried out in the state of the art, portable medical lab Grayson forced me into a few hours ago. Tests which will determine if Toby has rendered me infertile by his butchery in the Miller's barn. And right now, I hope to hell he did. Because otherwise, I'm in for the same fate as Rose Hooper. Locked up and forced to have Grayson's children to further a cursed bloodline.

I continue watching Gabriel sleep. I breathe in his scent and feel his magic humming all around me. I still have no idea what I'm going to say to him when he does open his eyes. Gabriel will learn that I was pregnant with Toby's child. That Toby beat me till it was no longer there while his other woman held me down. That his other brother kidnapped and drugged me after he was shot. That Grayson tied me down in the very spot I lost that baby, so he could brand me. And that we're all prisoners.

His brothers are evil. And his father is psychotic.

Theo wants to kill all the Nomads, so only his "Traitors" are left alive. All in the hope of stopping a war between witches and humanity.

He murdered Rose Hooper, who was pregnant with his own grandchild.

Gabriel's entire family are heartless, manipulative monsters. He's the only one with a soul. With a good heart. But no matter how big and loving that heart of his is, I fear that when he does finally wake up and learn the truth, that heart of his will break. And turn dark. Vengeful.

If he wakes up.

A tear slides down my cheek and lands on my pillow.

I will him to open his eyes. To move. To call me Beautiful and

smile his wicked half-smile. But he doesn't.

I haven't slept a wink since I returned from the Miller's barn, despite feeling exhausted. I've barely eaten. I feel nauseous all the time. I can't slow my heart rate no matter how hard I try. It's like my body is continuously producing adrenaline. I feel like I'm coming down with the flu. My skin is clammy. My body aches. And I'm unbelievably tired.

The beeping of his heart monitor starts to fade. My eyes grow too heavy. I can't keep them open a moment longer. I squeeze his hand, but my fingers don't move. My chest feels tight. Each breath is a chore. I can't move or call out for help.

I'm not falling asleep.

I'm falling unconscious.

Did Grayson do something to me in that van? When I wake, will I be in chains?

In a sudden jerk, Gabriel sits bolt upright with a huge gasp and clutches his chest, looking at the thick bandage covering his wound. He sees the pads and wires and notices the heart monitor beside him.

'What the fuck...'

He looks around the rest of the room, checking to see who else is there with him.

He sees me.

'Lilly,' he beams. Those beautiful blue eyes flood with relief and love. But I don't sit up. I don't move. I can't. With each blink, my eyes stay closed for longer, and his smile quickly disappears. 'Lilly?' He sits over me, tapping my cheek. 'Hey, hey, wake up!' I manage the slightest smile, so happy that he's awake. The back of his hand feels my forehead. 'Christ, you're on fire. What's happened?' He checks my pulse. His eyes widen in horror. He sits me up and holds me, but I'm dead weight. 'You need to stay awake, baby. Keep your eyes open. Keep breathing.' He holds me close, brushing my damp hair out of my face. 'Lilly... Lilly keep your eyes open. LILLY!' He shakes me. 'HELP... SOMEONE... HELP ME! FOR GOD'S SAKE... SOMETHING'S WRONG WITH HER!' He looks at my hand and rapidly unravels the bandage covering my stitches. 'Oh no. It's infected. Your blood is poisoned.' His yells for help fade and my eyes close. He pleads with me not to die. Not to leave him.

Am I? Is that what this is?

Am I dying?

But... I want revenge. I want to see my enemies burn.

I guess if I die, I'll just have to crawl out of hell to deliver my wrath.

Nothing will stop me. Nothing will save them.

They're going to pay.

They're going to die.

Three months later.

Catch your breath, Lilly. Just... breathe.

You got this!

I slide down the tree and crouch low, taking in deep breath after deep breath. The sun's bright. The sky's the clearest blue I've seen in a long time and I have a thin layer of sweat building on my brow. I've finally been able to ditch the jumpers and let the warm sun touch my pale skin. I've opted for comfort and ease today. A black strappy top to match my black leggings. A pair of black and white trainers. And a pair of long, black, fingerless woollen gloves that reach up to my elbows.

My scars are as visible as ever. My constant reminders of the road so far travelled. But I couldn't care less who sees my scars anymore. The marks on my arms and my back are a part of me, and I have accepted that. After everything I've been through, they're the least of my problems. Gone are the days I would cover up through shame and embarrassment.

But the brand, well... that's different. That's a target on my back. One I need to keep hidden. I don't want my enemies knowing I may not have my magic, so I wear long gloves to cover it.

In front of me, beyond the outdoor pool, the back door to The Orchard is wide open. The windows too. Letting in the cool spring air and clearing out the last few months of stress, tears and anger. And not just mine. The whole house has been a living hell.

I lean across and take the slightest peek out from behind the tree I'm using as a shield. As soon as he sees me, Grayson sends me a direct hit. I throw my arms up over my head and retreat back behind the tree as he continues to hurl his lightning at me, hoping that the slightest bit will reach me. The wood is charring and splintering behind my back. The bark groans against his assault. I can smell it burning and hear it crackling as I cower. But it doesn't reach me. Not yet.

'Come out and face me,' he taunts. 'Stop being such a coward!'

The tree starts to creak. It's going to fall and I'll lose my cover.

Shit!

I take a few deep, readying breaths and lower my hands.

You can do this. You have to do this, Lilly.

The tree's going over any second. No choice. I need to move.

I need to run.

On three, I tell myself.

One.

Two.

Three!

I charge out and sprint as fast as I can towards the next tree, leaving the other one to land with a thud on its side. Bits of branches and leaves snap off and go everywhere as I sprint away from the house.

His lightning chases my heels, but I'm fast, and manage to keep ahead of it. To my left, Hendrix is coming. Full pelt and teeth-bared. His low voice snarling as he sprints. Those jet-black eyes are focused on nothing but me. He opens his arms, ready to grab. Grayson's assault stops so he doesn't hit his vampire pet, and I lower myself, using my own momentum to slide along the grass beneath his reach. Hendrix snatches nothing but air before stopping and turning to pursue me. I'm back on my feet and I carry on running without daring to look back. I know Hendrix is furious that he missed me. The low growl he produces makes me shudder. Grayson hurls another shot straight ahead of me, hoping to stop me in my tracks. I leap over it, my heels missing it by an inch, and land with a roll before getting back to my feet and continuing my sprinting. The lightning blackens the grass, leaving zig-zags scorched into the lawn. Multiple bruises are already starting to form over my body. But I can't think about that now.

The tree is almost in sight. It will give me cover for just a moment. Enough to come up with a plan. But before I can get there, Gabriel steps out from behind it. He looks good. I've not seen him for a few days. He's in a black t-shirt that hugs him perfectly. His black jeans are tucked into his black boots and he's wearing that half-smile I've missed way too much.

How long has he been hiding there? How long has he been back at the house?

I don't get to ask before he pulls back his fist and throws me a punch. I stop so fast, I skid. My trainers hold little to no grip on the freshly cut grass, and I land on my backside. As he lunges down to grab me, I roll to the side and push myself back up. As I run away from him, Grayson is walking towards me with a casual strut and a smug smile. His hand shimmers with his lightning. The sleeves of his white shirt are rolled up and his top buttons undone. He's bare footed and ready to fight.

To win.

'You are not going anywhere,' Grayson says, a cruel smirk playing at his lips. 'So, stop trying to run, Miss Hooper.'

Like hell!

I veer off and start heading in the direction of what's left of the burnt orchard at the end of the grounds. I don't get far. A wall of telekinetic power pounds into me, forcing me through the air and making me land in a painful heap at Gabriel's feet. I groan and roll onto my back. Gabriel leans over me, blocking the sun and casting me in shadow.

'Need a hand?' he asks, holding out his own for me to take.

'No,' I reply, swallowing down the pain.

'Tough.' He yanks me to my feet and lets me go as I stagger about, trying to regain my balance. 'Ready?'

Gabriel throws a punch before I can respond. I barely see it in time. As his fist narrowly misses my face, I feel the air brush over my skin.

He throws another and another. I duck and weave, missing every strike and stumbling away, still trying to catch my balance and senses.

'HIT HER!' Grayson bellows.

'I'm trying,' Gabriel snarls back, as he continues trying to land a blow. 'You're a quick little thing, aren't you?'

'You know it, baby.'

I duck low as his arm soars over me. My elbow jabs into his ribs.

'Fucking hell,' he groans, hunching over and claspings his side. I upper cut his jaw and thump my fist into his face. It hurts me more than it hurts him, and I grab my three-fingered hand and swear with a hiss.

'I SAID HIT HER!'

'AND I SAID I'M FUCKING TRYING, GRAYSON!' Gabriel roars back, not taking his eyes off me. He keeps trying to get me. To grab me or hit me. As I stumble back, my feet trip over themselves and I fall. Once more I'm on the floor. My energy is seriously starting to wane. I half consider just giving up.

But most of me is a stubborn bitch these days. So instead of giving up, I grab Gabriel's ankle and pull with all my strength. He falls and lands on his back beside me. I don't waste a second. I return to my feet, stand over him and thrust the sole of my foot into his nose.

'AHRGH! FUCK!' he bellows, claspings his nose as blood seeps between his fingers. I leap over him, my target still to get to the orchard. But he grips my leg and I land on the floor face down. Gabriel flips me over and crawls up my body to pin me beneath him. There's blood falling down his face and over his lips. His hair hangs over his brilliantly blue eyes and he's covered in sweat, just as I am. He pants and laughs, touching the blood with his finger-tips.

'I think you broke my nose, Beautiful.' He grips my shoulders and lifts me, so his face is in mine. Both his knees remain either side of me, pinning me beneath him. 'You going to say sorry?'

‘Sure.’ I smash my forehead as hard as I can into his face. If his nose wasn’t broken before, it definitely is now. He falls back, swearing furiously. ‘Sorry.’

In my desperate and panicked attempt to get away, I trip and stumble as I get to my feet. With a quick glance over my shoulder, I see him jump up. He wipes his nose and laughs at the streak of red left behind. Lifting his head, he watches me with his mischievous half-smile.

‘Catch me if you can!’ I call over my shoulder.

‘Oh. I’ll catch you, Beautiful.’

A streak of Grayson’s lightning hits the ground in front of me, stopping my escape.

‘Enough flirting,’ Grayson threatens his brother angrily. ‘You catch her or I will.’ When I go to run again, Grayson sends another shot and shakes his head. ‘Enough running. Time to fight back.’ I turn, just in time to avoid Gabriel’s fist. I duck and he fails to land his blow.

‘Stop dodging and hit me back,’ Gabriel warns quietly, glancing at his psychotic brother in the distance. ‘Unless you want him to take my place?’

I kick him square in the nuts.

His eyes widen. His face pales and his mouth opens in a hollow O as he falls to his knees, clasping his crotch.

‘N-not what I had in mind,’ he croaks before slumping onto his side. ‘Ahhh, fuck.’

‘Shit. I’m sor-’

I hear a low growl before Hendrix grabs me by my hair and tosses me through the air. I scream as I soar, and swear when I hit the ground with a thud. I roll several times before stopping. I lay there winded and short of breath. My ribs, which already took a nasty knock earlier, now scream in agony. Although badly winded, I force myself up to my knees. But fail to get any further. My body’s exhausted and every attempt to get up ends with me back on the floor.

I’m done.

Hendrix still continues his descent on me. Both his fists are clenched.

‘Wait...’ I pant, holding up a hand as my other keeps me from falling face down in the grass. ‘I need a minute.’

‘Oh, Little Witch,’ Hendrix laughs as he towers over me. ‘We’re never gonna stop. Not till ya give Grayson what he wants. On ya feet.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You’re so fucking pathetic. Look at ya. Can’t even run away. Can’t fight back. Ya can’t save yourself or the people that ya love.’ He leans down into my face and looks into my eyes as my pain-filled breathing turns to rage. ‘What good are ya? Hmm?’ he asks. ‘All the power ya have. All that you’ve been through. All the monsters you’ve faced and defeated. And you’re still a pathetic little bitch. Still whimpering. Still

pleading for mercy. For respite.'

'Fuck off, half-breed,' I snarl.

'Words? That's all ya got?' He crouches down and rests his elbows on his knees. 'Grayson will tear you limb from limb if you don't get to your fucking feet and try to do what he wants.'

'You sound like you care,' I scoff.

'No. I don't really give a shit. I'm just getting real tired of repeating this exercise every mother-fucking day. There's only so many times I can beat ya down till I just get plain old bored. It's like slapping a puppy. You're not giving me a challenge.'

'Then let Grayson have a go.' I glance over his shoulder at Grayson who is watching us closely.

'If me or lover-boy stand aside and lets Grayson do this instead, we'll be scraping bits of pretty red-haired-witch out the pavement. Ya should consider yourself lucky Gabriel loves ya enough to do this in Grayson's place. Unlike lover-boy and me, Grayson won't hold back.'

'And what's your reason for helping me?' I ask with a snide tone. Like this is supposed to be helping.

'I want the Veil down. That's all. I don't care who ya fuck. Who ya love. Who killed ya baby.'

I feel the hatred spread across my face at his words as he simply leers at me.

'I'll do whatever it takes to return magic back to the mortal realm. I'll beat ya black and blue. I'll hold ya down as Grayson tortures you. We need ya to have access to all realms of magic in order to complete the spell, so I will do whatever it takes to get ya to manifest the rest of your powers. But, at the same time, we need ya alive. And Grayson has a temper. He's vindictive. And he doesn't know when enough is enough. You bruised his ego.'

'I rejected him and he would kill me for it. That's the man you serve.'

'The man I serve will get me what I want. I just need to keep Grayson from killing ya long enough to get it done. He takes our place out here? You'll be dead in a week. So. Stop flirting with lover-boy. Stop hiding behind the fucking trees. Stop bloody running away.' He points a finger at me. 'Fight. Back!'

'I can't,' I hiss back angrily. 'He won't let me.' My eyes land on Grayson who is slowly pacing back and forth, watching us. 'You're a vampire. Gabriel's a man twice my size. How can I beat you both when I'm not allowed to use my magic?'

'The whole idea of this fucking exercise is for ya to manifest your goddamn Physical magic, so ya *can* fight a vampire and a man twice your size.' He leans into my face. I wince at the stench of his breath. 'I suggest ya get on with it before Grayson starts to lose his patience.'

His mouth widens and he goes for my neck with his teeth. As soon as they pierce my skin, I panic and send out a wave of Telekinetic power. Hendrix soars through the air, crashing to the ground and rolling away, stopping by Grayson's feet.

As I scramble up, I turn and face them all. Gabriel gets up, still flinching at the pain I've inflicted between his legs. Hendrix simply bounces to his feet looking excited and hungry for the fight. But Grayson... Grayson's dark eyes swim with anger and frustration. When Hendrix goes to resume his attack, Grayson rests his hand on his chest and stops him. His hands shimmer with lightning that weaves slowly and vibrantly between his fingers, snaking up his forearms and building in strength.

I wipe the trickle of blood slowly making its way down my neck and get ready.

I've broken the rules. I'm not to use my magic unless it's a new realm of power. So now, Grayson can have a go at encouraging a manifestation.

He steps around the vampire and starts heading towards me. Quickly. As he descends, Gabriel calls his name. But Gabriel can't compel him. Not without dire consequences. He can't interfere without it resulting in death and pain and misery. Grayson reaches me swiftly and grabs my throat. He squeezes. His fingers are wringing the life from me as I claw and scratch at his grip. His face is contorted with anger and hatred. I know he wants to kill me. And if he didn't need me to do the spell, I would be dead by now. He starts pushing me back, my feet stumbling over themselves as he does. And when he stops, I'm dangling backwards over the deep end of the pool.

'Prize my hands from your neck,' he orders through clenched teeth. I try. But they're like stone.

'Manifest your Physical magic,' he warns, like I'm choosing for it not to come to me. My vision is starting to blur. My eyes feel ready to pop from the pressure. I can't breathe! Not a bit. He pushes me further back and I struggle to keep my feet on the ground.

'Manifest!' he orders again. 'MANIFEST!'

I start hitting his hand. His chest. Anything I can reach. I will my magic to form. For the power of strength and healing to come to me. But nothing comes. And everything is starting to go black as he continues to choke me.

My hands fall by my side and my body falls limp in his grasp. I'm about to blackout when Gabriel grabs Grayson's wrist.

'Get o-'

A blast of Telekinetic power sends Gabriel away before he can finish his words, and Grayson returns his focus to me.

'Manifest. If you want to breathe... MANIFEST!' Spit flies from his

mouth and his breath lands hot on my skin.

The next thing I see is Hendrix taking hold of Grayson's neck and wrist. He forces him to let me go. Hendrix then tosses Grayson away from me.

Stupid thing to do, because now, no one is holding me and I fall backwards. Straight into the pool.

The cold water engulfs me and fills my mouth. It goes up my nose and the chlorine stings my eyes. Steadily, I sink to the bottom of the pool and look up. The blue sky is distorted with the way I've disrupted the water above me.

I lay still. Motionless. Barely conscious.

I let out the last bit of air that Grayson didn't choke from me, and release a few bubbles which I watch float slowly to the surface.

It's suddenly very peaceful.

The way the cold water soothes my injuries and eases my aching muscles is a slice of bliss. It's very calming. The water fills my ears. It drowns out the yells of the men above me who are fighting. Of my own anger and frustrations at my failure to do this. At my overwhelming sense of hopelessness at my situation. This torture has been going on for months. And I'm starting to tire of it. I'm tired of the constant threats. Of the random outbursts of horrific violence. Of the bruises that never get to heal and the cuts that are reopened before they can fully scab.

I miss Amara and Collins who were sent away while I was recovering from the blood poisoning in my hand. They're prisoners. One miss-step from me, and Amara will be killed and Collins tortured into insanity. Six weeks ago, Grayson started using his lightning on me to try and encourage my Energy magic. He went too far and I went into cardiac arrest. His same lightning restarted my heart. Gabriel went mad and punched Grayson. The next day, I received one of Amara's fingers in a brown envelope as punishment for his actions.

I close my eyes and take this brief moment of rest. I lose myself in this quiet little world I've been thrown into and for the first time in months, I have a second of respite from Grayson and his never-ending brutality. Part of me wishes I could stay here. I could open my mouth and gulp in this water. I could fill my lungs and my belly in a matter of seconds.

But then, who would tear Toby's face off? Who would rip Theo to pieces? Who would watch as Grayson burnt to ash?

And who would save my friends? Who would save Gabriel?

No.

Fight!

I have to keep fighting.

My lungs begin to hurt. They're desperate for air. And as much as

I'd like to stay in this other world, I can't. I'm not done yet. I'm not ready to die. To leave Gabriel behind. And I will never be ready to let them win. The men who have hurt me in a million ways.

I sit up and plant my feet on the floor before pushing myself back up to reality.

But the pool is deep.

At least twice as deep as I am tall. And my push off doesn't get me anywhere near breaking the water's surface. As I start to sink once more, I realise.

I can't swim!

My feet land on the tiles. And once more, I push off. I claw at the water. I kick my legs. But I just sink. The pain from the extreme lack of oxygen is unbearable.

I make contact with the tiles once more and fall to my knees.

I still have my magic. Grayson hasn't cut me off yet. I hold out my hands and flick up my wrists. As I do, the water rises from the pool and soars up into the sky with a loud roar. My arms lift as it goes, and I send it out in a circular wave, as far away from me as possible while I remain on my knees. As soon as I can, I take in a greedy gulp of air. In the distance, I hear the crash of the contents of the pool landing on the ground. As well as a few swear words from the men it must have landed on. I wipe the water clear of my eyes in the now, very empty, outside swimming pool, while coughing and gasping. My hands caress my throat which I know will bruise in the shape of Grayson's hand.

After a few seconds, Grayson and Gabriel both peer over the edge. They're both soaking wet and dripping with pool water.

'I told you,' Grayson says sternly, wiping the water from his furious face. 'Not to use your known realms of magic in these sessions.'

'I can't swim. Would you rather I drown?'

I feel him cut me off from my magic as he continues to glare.

'You threw Hendrix away from you. If you wanted him off, you should have manifested your Physical magic.'

I want to argue. I want to hurl insults. But I don't. I know what will follow if I do. Death and pain to those I love.

My eyes settle on his chest, where just beneath his shirt, I know he has the Bloodstone dangling on a chain around his neck. It's so close. But so far away. If I even think about grabbing it, the Nomads that surround us are instructed to shoot to injure Gabriel and me. And to send word to whoever has Amara to kill her outright.

Gabriel thought he could be quick with his compulsion and try to grab the Bloodstone a few months ago. But as soon as his eyes went black, that was it.

Three bullets to his leg, a black eye for me, and Amara and Collins were taken then and there.

Gabriel hasn't tried again.

Mainly because I begged him not to. I won't lose Amara. I can't.

'You need to manifest your Physical or Energy magic!' Grayson snaps, running his hands through his dripping hair and flicking off the excess from his hands. 'Why do you think we are doing this? You are supposed to fight back. Not dodge every attack and run away. You are supposed to fight us. Conjure up a new realm of power to beat us with. You may not believe this, Lilly, but I don't exactly enjoy these sessions.'

'Could have fooled me,' Gabriel grunts, climbing down the poolside steps. He heads over as Grayson remains at the edge looking very annoyed and unimpressed. Gabriel wipes the remainder of his bloody nose clear with his forearm and when he reaches me, he checks me over with extreme concern as he brushes my wet hair out the way of my face. I wrap my arms around his neck and sink into him.

'I'm so glad to see you,' I whisper. He's been gone for five days and it's been awful every second.

'Me too, Beautiful. I'm sorry it took so long.' He holds me at a distance so he can examine me. The misery in his eyes as he looks at my throat is enough to break my heart. 'Are you injured badly?' he asks, running his fingers along my neck.

'I'm okay now you're home.'

'We're doing this without you next time, Gabriel.' Grayson spits hatefully. 'You are holding back.'

'Trust me.' I lift my top and see a patch of blue already appearing on my ribs. 'He's not holding back.'

'Yeah well, next time.'

'I'm sorry.' Gabriel ignores Grayson while trying, but failing, to keep the murderous hatred he has for him from showing. He delicately strokes the bruises on my side and winces as if he's feeling the pain himself. I reach up and take his face in my hands. I inspect the damage I caused to him.

'I'm sorry too. I think I broke your nose.'

'It will be fine in a few hours,' he says, waving his hand dismissively. His hands feel my hips and his brow furrows even deeper. 'Lilly, you're losing too much weight. Have you eaten at all since I've been gone?'

'I'm fine, Gabriel. Please don't worry.'

That loathing that took root the morning he woke up and saw my brand, grows every day. And it grows even more as he looks up at Grayson.

'You promised me that you wouldn't do any more of this torture while I was away. You agreed that she needed rest.'

Grayson merely shrugs. 'I lied.'

‘What else did you lie about? What else happened when I was gone?’

‘Calm down. Please don’t start a fight. Nothing else happened.’ I assure him.

‘That is the last time you send me away, Grayson. You want something checked out? You can do it yourself. I’m not leaving her alone with you again.’

‘You don’t have a choice. It’s only through my good graces I allow you to stay with her, in my house, in the first place. So check your tone, little brother. Or I’ll have Amara’s head delivered to your girlfriend on a silver platter, and have you sent away with Collins.’

Gabriel goes to argue but I grab his hand and plead with him not to say another word. Thankfully, Gabriel returns his attention to me and helps me to my feet instead.

‘Lilly, you need to try harder,’ Grayson orders. ‘And Gabriel, you need to be harder on her.’

‘The manifestations will come when they come,’ Gabriel tells Grayson without looking at him. ‘You know what Quinn said. They can’t be forced.’

‘And I’m growing impatient of waiting for them to decide when they want to appear. I don’t really care what Mr Quinn says. We are not stopping until she manifests a new realm of power. I don’t care what I have to do.’

‘Even if it means killing her?’

‘I won’t kill her,’ he replies. ‘But I don’t need her in one piece to do the spell. I just need her to have access to all seven-realms of magic. She can do it in a wheel chair for all I care. Or with her best friend’s head on a spike. Your grace period is almost up. In three weeks, our agreed deadline of my back-seat involvement ends, and I will take over her training completely. It’s only due to my affection for you both that I allowed us to waste this much time in the first place.’

‘Affection,’ Gabriel scoffs quietly. He’s not going to hear much more. Every muscle in his body has gone rigid and his teeth are clenched together.

I guide his face to me and put on my best smile. ‘Calm yourself, my love.’

‘I can’t do this much longer,’ he whispers quietly. ‘I won’t.’

‘You must. Our friends lives hang in the balance.’

We head to the steps of the pool. Gabriel lifts me so I can reach and Grayson pulls me out as soon as I’m in touching distance.

‘Mr Quinn is waiting for you in the library,’ Grayson informs me. ‘I suggest you dry off, get something to eat, and head in there to meet him. My brother is right about one thing. You are losing too much weight.’ He leans in and plants a soft kiss on my cheek. He watches

Gabriel all the while, not hiding his smug grin as his lips linger on my skin. When I don't respond, Grayson uses his finger to guide my face in his direction. 'Did you hear me?' he asks.

'I heard you,' I reply. 'Can I go?'

'Remember the rules, Miss Hooper,' he whispers. 'Third floor.'

'I'm not likely to forget the rules, *Mr Kendryk*,' I reply, holding my disingenuous smile. 'Third floor. I know.'

As I go to leave, he tightens his hold.

'Where's *my* kiss?' he asks, tapping the side of his face. I lean in and peck his cheek.

'Good girl. Off you go.' As I leave, I reach for Gabriel's hand. I'm desperate to know what he found out during the five days he was away.

'Not you.' Grayson adds. 'Gabriel, you stay here with me and fill me in on exactly what you found while looking for our little brother.'

'You already know,' Gabriel sighs. 'Billy was with me every second. I know he told you what I found.'

Grayson shrugs, not giving a damn.

'Have you found him?' I ask anxiously. 'Is he here?' I look around as if Toby may suddenly appear. Gabriel goes to speak, but Grayson cuts him off.

'Inside. Now, Miss Hooper. Don't make me repeat myself. Amara may find it unpleasant.'

I look to Gabriel, pleading with my eyes for any information.

Gabriel slides his hands in his pockets and also nods towards the house, urging me in. 'Go inside, Beautiful. It's alright. I'll be in soon.'

But I remain stuck to the spot.

'C'mon, Little Witch,' Hendrix says gruffly, walking forwards and taking hold of my elbow. 'Let's get you upstairs.'

Gabriel and Grayson both watch me as I'm led away by Hendrix and taken back inside the house.

I look up at him. 'Is Toby here?'

He looks down and shakes his head. 'No. He's not here. Lover-boy didn't find him.'

I let out a breath, not sure if it was relief or disappointment that caused the long exhale. Probably both.

Toby's not here. Which means he can't hurt me. But it also means that I can't hurt him either. And that he's still out there. Why is everyone still free but me? Theo. Jensen. Toby. Grayson. It's not fair.

As we make our way through the kitchen, Hendrix tells me, 'Ya did well out there. Those moves Gabriel's been teaching ya worked well. The punches and dodging techniques-'

'Let's not do the small-talk thing, Hendrix. Okay?' I walk ahead, but he stays close on my heels.

The house is full of Nomads acting as security. Most avoid looking at me as I pass. Some sneer or whisper to each other. Once a week, Gabriel and I are forced to sit with each and every one stationed at the house in order to interrogate them all. Together, we look into their minds and search for any sign that they may be working with anyone else. Theo. Jensen. Hunters. Toby. So far, they're all clean. And I have dug deep looking for any sign of the bastards.

I relish in the task. Any excuse to get hold of my magic. Every second. Every opportunity, is just more practice. And I'm getting good. Stronger. Grayson doesn't like me working on building my manifested realms. One of his many rules. He claims it's because I can't be trusted. That I can't control myself. But the truth is he doesn't want me getting stronger.

In truth, no one does.

After they all saw what I did to Theo's men at the Traitor camp, and how I almost lost control, I've made them nervous.

Grayson, however, is outright cruel. He humiliates me. Hurts me. Threatens me. He is confident he *"has me on my leash"*. So he is unafraid of any consequences to his actions. He has the only friends I have in the world held captive. I don't know where or by who. We only have his word that they're not in any pain and that they'll remain safe if Gabriel and I follow his rules.

So yeah, I suppose I am on my leash.

But Grayson needs me to manifest the remainder of my magic. Physical, Sight and Energy are still eluding me. I need all seven if I'm to lower the Veil. That's according to Connor Quinn at any rate. The Nomad who has taken up a permanent residence here at The Orchard. Or really, the library. Talk about a book worm. Grayson calls him the coven's Archivist. He can read twenty languages, which is very handy, considering the task at hand.

Hendrix and I climb the stairs in silence, followed by a Nomad named Ste. He's my shadow. Always there and willing to shoot me with the tranquilizer dart he has loaded in his gun if I so much as look at him funny. I've been hit five times by his darts so far. So I know he's not shy on pulling the trigger.

My hand rests on the door handle of the bedroom I share with Gabriel up on the third floor.

I turn back to Hendrix and feel the blood still slowly trickling down my nape. 'If you ever bite me again, the first thing I'll do when I get free of Grayson, is pull your teeth out. Do you hear me?'

He rests his hand over mine and opens the door. 'You should spend less time obsessing over the revenge you ain't ever gonna get, and more time working on getting ya manifestations to come. Get some rest and then get yourself to the library. The fairy is waiting for ya.'

‘Don’t call him that.’

He walks off laughing.

Deciphering the journal has taken months. And so far, all we’ve learnt is that I need to use all seven-realms of power in order to perform the spell. But the spell itself is still lost in the words no one but me can read.

Ste clears his throat. ‘Grayson wanted me to remind you to be in the library within the hour.’

‘I know, Ste. I was there when he told me.’

I head inside and slam the door shut before running to the window. I see clear over the grounds. Grayson and Gabriel are talking on their own. I can’t see their faces, but no one’s being tortured or shot. So that’s a relief.

I make my way into the bathroom and lock the door. I turn on the shower and let it run. I’ll wash off the chlorine before heading to the library to continue translating the journal. I slump down on the edge of the stand-alone, cast iron bath tub and take a deep breath, rubbing my neck and swallowing painfully against the bruising.

Outside, the bedroom door opens and closes.

‘Beautiful? Where are you? Lilly?’ Before I can answer Gabriel, the handle on the bathroom starts to turn. ‘Why have you locked the door?’ Gabriel calls, thumping it. ‘I hate it when you lock the door. Open up.’

‘I was about to jump in the shower.’

‘I’ve seen you naked a hundred times over. No need to be shy.’ He tries the handle again, like it may have miraculously unlocked itself. ‘Lilly, open the door. Now, please.’ Again, he taps his knuckles on the wood.

‘Alright. Alright. Keep your knickers on.’ I force myself to my feet. I’m so tired I could curl up on this floor and sleep. Instead, I head over and unlock it. He opens it without a second to spare and looks down at me suspiciously.

‘Why did you lock it?’ he asks, with a deep furrow on his brow.

‘I didn’t want Grayson charging in. That’s all.’

‘I don’t like it when you lock the door, Lilly,’ he repeats sternly. ‘You said you wouldn’t do it again. After what you did-’

‘And I told you that what happened a few months ago was an accident. And that I wouldn’t do it again. I didn’t try to kill myself, Gabriel. For goodness sake.’ I turn on my heel and head to the sink. ‘And I’ve already had Grayson walking in while I was showering once. Not too keen to repeat the experience.’ I run the tap and wash my hands. ‘He just stood there watching me like a creep and refused to give me a towel.’ I shudder at the memory.

‘Show me your arm.’ Gabriel follows me and holds out his hand

expectantly.

‘What? No. Don’t be daft. Tell me what you found when you were away.’

‘Nothing. Lilly!’ He looks at me severely through the mirror. ‘Show me your arm.’

‘Is my word not enough? I said it’s fine. Everything is fine.’

‘Maybe I would believe you if you weren’t so defensive. Arm. Now!’ He gestures to his outstretched hand. ‘Show me, or I will make you hand it over. Show me your arm!’

I give him my right arm. He slides off the long black glove and lets out a long, relieved sigh.

‘Yep. Just the brand and my usual scars. Nothing else. Like I said, I’m not looking to kill myself. I’m not hiding away up here slitting my wrists, Gabriel. I’m having a shower.’ I hear the anger in my voice. And so does he.

‘Yeah. I know. But still. Walking in on you with a gash in your arm and a carving knife in your hand has left me a little twitchy.’

‘That was two months ago. I just thought I could get rid of the brand. That’s all.’ I snatch my hand back.

‘You know it can’t be skinned off.’

‘Or burnt off. Or scratched off. Yeah, I know.’

‘And it’s not through lack of trying on your part. Hence the twitching man in front of you.’ He tucks my hair behind my ear and lifts my chin with his finger. ‘I only worry because I care. Because I love you.’ He takes a step closer, pressing his body flush against mine. His nose rests on my cheek and his lips plant small delicate kisses along my jaw. But then he quickly stops. ‘Hendrix bit you. Sit down. I’ll get it cleaned up.’ He lowers me down on the edge of the bath and pulls out the first aid box from under the sink.

As he sets about wiping the blood up and cleaning the cut, I ask him, ‘What did Grayson want?’

‘Nothing,’ he mumbles, still focused on my neck.

‘What did you find when you were away? Have you found Toby yet?’ I ask.

‘No.’ Whatever he sprays on my skin makes it sting. ‘Sorry,’ he says, wincing on my behalf. ‘I don’t want it to get infected. There... all done.’

‘Did you follow up on that lead?’ I ask. ‘About the man with lilac eyes in Scotland?’

Gabriel groans and returns to his feet.

‘I did,’ he sighs heavily, packing away the bloody wipes. ‘Like I said, we’ve not found any sign of Toby yet. The five days I was away were a complete waste of time and probably nothing more than a way for Grayson to separate us. Can we talk about something else? What

happened here-'

'What about the man with white hair in Wales?' I ask. Now he groans angrily, throwing his arms up in the air and hissing a swear word. 'Because Toby did mention this cottage once somewhere in-'

'No, Lilly! Bias is not in a cottage in Wales!' he snaps. 'Nor is he in a boat house in Scotland. And before you ask,' he interrupts as I open my mouth. 'No, he is not the guy selling bongos in Camden Market either. That was an albino kid on a student visa from Canada. My whole trip was a waste of fucking time. There's no sign of Bias anywhere. Now please, can we stop taking about him?'

'Toby! His name is Toby. Stop calling him Bias! And I'm sorry if me finding the man who murdered my unborn baby, is annoying you!' I shriek at him, shoving him hard in his chest. I feel the ever present angry, hate-filled and heartbroken sobs, starting to climb my throat. 'I need to find him, Gabriel.'

'We will, Beautiful. We will! But right now, your focus must be on surviving this house until we can get you out of here. That is what matters. These manifestations and-'

'Finding that monster and making him pay is all that matters!' Hot tears spring into my eyes. They spill down my cheeks. 'Seeing my best friend alive and well! Not living every second scared and helpless, waiting for Toby to come back and-and...' I can't speak. I just start to sob. My hands bury in my hair and I fight the urge to scream all the pain I feel out into the world till my voice disappears for good.

His arms engulf me and I'm held close to his solid chest. 'Shhh, Beautiful,' he coos. 'It's okay. I know. I'm sorry.' He kisses the crown of my head as I sink into his chest. Slowly he rocks me as I wail in his arms, all the while, he whispers things of comfort and love in my ear.

I'm so lost in my misery, I didn't realise he'd taken off my clothes until he led me into the shower where we sink to the floor together. The water falls over my skin. The soap blends into the cuts on my arms and makes them sting. As I run my hands up and down my body to wash off the dirt and blood, I feel every bruise, both old and new. And even those that are still to form. The foam gathers by my feet and swirls down the drain as I shower off the day. The same as I have for the last three months. Blood, sweat, tears and dirt are all washed away, but I know that tomorrow, I'll be doing the exact same thing all over again.

I sink further into his body. His warmth soothes the aches that plague me. The sound of the water drowns out my thoughts. This is the only piece of solitude and comfort I get. With him, behind a locked door.

'I'm gonna fix this,' he promises as the water cascades over us both. 'I'll get you out of here. I'll get you somewhere safe and bring Amara

and Collins back to us. I promise. I promise. Just hold on, okay?’ I lift my head. I can’t tell what’s tears or water from the shower. He looks down at me, his dark hair falling over his eyes and a sad furrow on his troubled brow. He has so much anger, pain, worry and heartbreak going on inside him too, let alone dealing with mine on top of it all. His brothers and his dad are our enemies. He’s lost his entire family. His best friend is captive, as well as mine. His eyes travel down to my neck. Carefully, he examines the bruising and winces.

‘He swore he would wait until I came home to carry on your training.’

‘He did. Until an hour before you walked out from that tree at any rate. I wish I could have run into your arms rather than break your nose.’

‘Those sessions are torturous. Raising my fists to you makes me feel sick. But I know he’ll be much harsher than me. Christ. Look at your neck. He could have killed you if Hendrix hadn’t got him off you.’ He caresses my cheek.

Of all the anger and despair I have swirling inside, none of it is aimed at him. Yes. He attacked me today. He’s attacked me a dozen times in the past few weeks since we found out that I need the rest of my realms of power. But he only does it to protect me from Grayson who would go at me much harder. His ocean blue eyes seem to be getting duller every day. His skin paler. His smiles are less bright.

‘I don’t know how to make this any easier for you,’ he admits. ‘All I can think to do is replace the hurt he causes with kindness. It’s all I’m good for. I can’t fight him. I can’t protect you properly.’

‘I love you, Gabriel. As long as I have you by my side, I can face anything.’

‘I swear to you, I will always be by your side. Your side is all that matters to me. You. You are all that matters to me.’ He takes my face in both his hands and looks deep into my eyes. ‘My family will pay for what they have done to you. They will pay with blood. With their lives. I swear it.’

‘Promise?’

‘On my life. Grayson, Theo, Jensen and Toby will pay. Even if it kills me.’

‘Wake up, Beautiful,’ Gabriel whispers softly in my ear. His fingers gently run up and down my arm, leaving a trail of goose bumps as they go.

I bury my face further into my pillow. ‘I’m not sleeping. Just resting.’ Is my mumbled reply.

‘Either way, we need to get out of bed.’

‘No,’ I groan, pulling the duvet over my head.

He chuckles and pulls it off. ‘If I had it my way, I’d let you sleep. God knows you need it. But if we don’t get that lovely backside of yours into the library soon, Grayson’s going to come up here looking for an argument.’ He sweeps the hair from my face and rests his lips on my cheek with a lingering kiss. ‘I love you.’

‘Love you more.’

‘Not possible.’ He gets out of our nice warm bed and heads towards the wardrobe. ‘No one can love anyone as much as I love you,’ he adds with a wink over his shoulder.

His bedroom, is now *our* bedroom. And Gabriel has made sure that I feel as comfortable as possible in here with him. Considering that *in here* is the only place we are allowed to be together as a couple.

The third-floor rule.

The first thing he did was get rid of his bed. The antique four poster that had been in his family for hundreds of years was dismantled. It’s been replaced with a super-king, black, leather bed with a TV built into the foot end. I have to admit, I’m glad. I hated the idea of sleeping in a bed where he was forced to be with Ava. And so did he. So now, we snuggle up in our new, modern bed together and watch films until we fall asleep. I head over to the wardrobe we share and pull out a pair of jeans. Our clothes are all mixed up. There’s no order to our chaos. I groan as I slide on one of Gabriel’s baggy tops. The hits I received still hurt and my ribs protest my movements.

‘You need painkillers.’ He heads to the bedside table and digs about in the drawer before pulling out a pot of pills. Tipping two into his hand, he heads back, holding them out for me to take.

‘To be honest, I’d rather not. I don’t trust anything that may have come from Grayson. Last time I accepted something from him, I ended up unconscious and branded.’

‘Well. These came from the doctor. And I licked them. They’re paracetamol.’ He places the pills in my hand.

‘You licked them?’

‘Yes.’ He kisses my lips. ‘I licked them good. Now come on. It’s been over an hour since the session in the garden and Grayson will be getting impatient. We need to get to the library.’

‘Hand me some gloves, will you?’

He opens the top drawer of my dresser and selects a black pair with white lace trim.

‘So. What *did* Grayson want to talk to you about earlier? Down in the garden?’

‘First he wanted to know exactly what I found in London. I told him the same as Billy had. There’s no sign of Bias anywhere. We went to his old haunts. Nothing.’

‘Toby,’ I correct him. ‘I hate that he sent you to look for him. Grayson’s such a coward.’

‘I’m the only one that can get close enough. My compulsion is effective.’

‘For seconds,’ I remind him.

‘Which is more than anyone else can do. I just need to get close and I can get him. I know it. But no one can find the little psycho after you left him half-dead in the woods.’ He sits on the bed and pulls on his boots. ‘And we still have no idea how he got away in the first place, which is beyond infuriating.’

‘Have you heard from the others?’

His face falls the same as it does every time I ask about Amara or Collins. He shakes his head.

‘You would tell me if there was something I needed to know, right? Complete honesty, remember? We promised. No more lying to protect each other. If they’re hurt, you can tell me.’

‘I know. And I swear I’m telling you everything I know. From what I gather they’re at the Nomad camp under guard. I can’t imagine it’s entirely fun for them at the moment but they have each other. Same as we have each other.’ He gets to his feet. I watch him suspiciously but he keeps his composure well. ‘Say it,’ he insists, folding his arms across his chest. ‘Go on. Say it.’

‘Everything good?’ I ask with a fake cheeriness and an over-the-top smile.

He settles into a very calming expression, takes my hand in his and relaxes completely. ‘*Absofuckinglutely*,’ he replies. ‘Happy? Everything is *absofuckinglutely* fine.’

‘Happy,’ I reply. We have a code now. A code only the two of us know. If we’re ever unsure if a situation means danger, we simply ask the other, “Everything good?”. If they reply, “*Absofuckinglutely*”, it means all is well. If they reply “*Absolutely*”, it means trust nothing and no one. Not what you see or what you hear.

It means danger.

But his response means that as far as he's aware, our missing friends are okay.

I suppose I should be thankful. No news is better than a severed finger in the mail.

'You would think that after seeing what you did to the last man that pissed you off, he'd at least try and get on your good side. I mean, you are the most powerful witch on the planet. Talk about poking the bear.'

'Not right now I'm not. Why would he care about being on my good side? Grayson doesn't think for a second I'll get my magic back from him, but I will. Somehow. And you said you wouldn't mention that again. I'm not exactly proud of my actions at the Traitor Camp.'

He goes quiet and stares blankly into space. A look of anguish creeps across his features and I know where he's gone. He doesn't give a damn about the people I killed at the camp. Not one bit. But seeing my hair turn white, and learning the truth about what happened in that barn with Toby and then with Grayson, definitely affected him. Much more than he lets on.

'You could stay up here and get some sleep if you want?' I offer, keen to return him back to the land of the living. He shakes away the dark place he was immersed in momentarily, and beams at me.

'No chance,' he insists, running his hands down my arms and giving me his best smile. 'I'm coming with you. Two heads are better than one and the sooner we get the rest of the journal translated, the sooner we can do the spell and figure out a way to get away from Grayson.' He takes my hand and we head out onto the landing. Ste is waiting, along with another man named Jez. He's Gabriel's guard. Jez is deaf but can lip-read, so Gabriel can't compel him with his words. He has a tranquilizer gun too and is not afraid to use it. Gabriel's been hit too many times to count. Not only for *his* actions and words, but mine too.

As soon as we reach the stairs, Gabriel lets me go.

Because of the third-floor rule.

We can only be *together* up here in our bedroom. No one is to know we're a couple. Ste and Jez know of course. But no one else. According to Grayson, it's simply to ensure that we can't be used against each other again. Gabriel was kidnapped to lure me out. And if Gabriel dies, they all die. It's best we keep it on the down low.

Bull shit.

Grayson's just humiliated I've chosen Gabriel over him and doesn't want anyone to know. It was expected of us that we would end up together, apparently. The Coven Leader and the Arcane.

I'd rather die.

As we reach the second floor, Grayson calls up the stairs for

Gabriel to join him in his office. I'm reluctant to let him go alone.

'You head to the library and I'll go see what he wants. On my way back, I'll fetch us something to eat.'

'Will you lick it to make sure it's not poisoned?' I laugh.

'Jokes on you. I've been testing all your food and drink for months. Licking them all, good and proper.'

'Aww. Thanks, baby,' I laugh. 'So sweet and not at all gross. Fine. Go see what the psycho wants and come straight back. Bring cookies.'

'Please, is this my first day as the love of your life? Of course I'll fetch you your cookies.'

'Like, four boxes of cookies.'

He smiles down at me. 'You're gonna get all squidgy if you don't start eating some vegetables. You can't live of cookies you know.'

'You won't love me if I get squidgy?' I ask, pouting out my lower lip.

'I'd love you if you were nothing but a cookie sized squidge,' he replies with the softest smile. 'Stay in the library,' he instructs.

'I will. Don't start a fight with Grayson.'

'I won't.'

'I love you.'

He absolutely beams every time I say that to him. Like he can't believe the words that he's heard and that each time is the very first.

'I love you more,' he replies.

'Impossible.'

'In you go, Beautiful,' he chuckles. 'I'll be back before you know it.'

He better, I think to myself as I head inside the library and he takes off downstairs.



I truly adore this room. The Orchard's library is utterly amazing and is this house's only redeeming quality. The smell of the old books. The warm light streaming in through the windows. The quiet.

Well, usually.

The sound of a heavy thud, followed by a loud curse, drags my attention back to why I'm here in the first place. I walk further in, scouring the empty room for the source of the profanity. The tables and floors are stacked with books. Even more than before, because now, we have Connor Quinn and his literary collection here.

Another thump as a heavy book hits the floor echoes off the walls, followed by an, 'Ahhh, Shite!'

'Connor?' I call out, scooping up abandoned book after abandoned book from the floor, like a trail of heavy, leather-bound bread crumbs.

‘Are you alright up there?’

From the upper gallery I hear some shuffling, more falling books and finally footsteps. A young man leans over the bannister. His long, curly, dark brown hair hangs over his eyes as he breaks out into an enormous smile.

‘Afternoon, Lilly,’ Connor chirps, in his thick Irish accent. ‘Did yer have any luck in yer training session this mornin’?’

‘Hey, Connor. No, I didn’t,’ I reply, placing the books in a neat pile before heading up to meet him. ‘Got some lovely bruised ribs and almost drowned, but that’s about it.’

‘Ahh, feck. Yer alright? Need to sit down?’

‘I’m fine. It’s more frustrating than anything.’

‘Well, I did tell yer man that it’s gotta be real, deep and genuine emotion. I keep tellin’ him, hopin’ he’ll lay off yer. But Grayson won’t listen,’ he says, walking towards me. He trips over his loose shoelace and stumbles, but pays no attention. The man trips over air. It’s just part of how he walks. ‘On yer own?’

‘Gabriel will be along shortly,’ I tell him as he nods absentmindedly.

As ever, he’s put very little effort into his appearance. Less than me. He’s wearing the rattiest pair of dark grey converse with holes and stains. The dirty laces trail behind him as he walks and gets stuck under his feet far too often. He’s always in a long-sleeved top with some kind of band t-shirt over the top. On the left side of his neck, from beneath his jaw and disappearing under his shirt, is a thick mess of burn scars. I’ve never asked, and he’s never said what caused them. And he has never asked me about my various marks. Although he’s in his late twenties, he reminds me of a teenager. Uncoordinated. Distracted. But really, very sweet. He’s a Descendent from the south-west of Ireland. He lives in a Nomad camp over there, but has come to stay here to help translate the Journal. Connor holds out a pile of notes for me to take

‘How’s your Scottish-Gaelic?’ he asks.

‘Is that a euphemism?’ I laugh, taking them.

‘No,’ he says with a confused frown. ‘Why would that be a euphemism?’

‘It was a joke,’ I sigh, rolling my eyes at his utterly literal nature. ‘Why do you need to know Scottish-Gaelic?’

‘It’s the twelfth language I’ve found in your notes from the journal.’

‘*Another* language?’ I groan, looking down at the notes taken from the journal which may as well be a ball and chain around my ankle. We’re not allowed the whole book. Grayson has been photocopying pages and giving them to us a couple at a time. Connor translates some. Grayson others. And Hendrix even does a few. No one other

than Grayson gets to read it all though. Who knows what he's learnt reading it. 'Bloody hell, Connor. This is taking so long.'

'Sorry,' he says sympathetically. 'I'm trying my hardest for yer. But we're nearly done. Shouldn't be long now. We know you need all seven-realms and I'm getting so close to figuring out what the stone Rebecca keeps mentioning may mean.'

The journal seemingly was in complete gibberish when I first read it almost a week after getting the bloody thing. When anyone else read it, it wasn't even words. Gabriel said all he could see were dots and squiggles. But I could see words. I just didn't understand them. I read a line aloud and Grayson recognised a word. *Effundum*. It was Latin. And another, *Scaoileadh*. That was Gaelic. Turns out Rebecca had written her journal in a heap of different languages then added a glamour over it, making one thing seem like something else. The only person who can see through the glamour is another Arcane.

Me.

But I don't know any of these languages. I've got good at Latin the past few months, mind.

So, I've had to write the whole lot out, exactly as it appears to me on the page, and the others translate whatever language it is in, into English. But there are hundreds of pages. With drawings, symbols and random paragraphs of text in no order whatsoever. It's taking ages. Plus, I'm right handed. I can't yet use my three-fingered hand well enough to write legibly. So most of the time, Gabriel scribes for me, and then the page is given directly to Grayson, Hendrix or Connor. Connor is not to discuss what he has translated with anyone, and the Nomads, Ste and Jez, watch us closely to make sure of that fact. The Irish Archivist has moved in to help with the translation full time. He reads over twenty languages. Has an eidetic memory and can do long calculations in his head. He's a genius. And although he follows Grayson's rules and refuses to discuss specifics of the journal – because Grayson will kill him if he does – I can't help but love the guy. He's so sweet. So kind and funny. And very innocent. All wide eyed and in love with the world. Even though the people in it haven't been that great to him.

'Another language?' I groan, almost pleadingly. 'Really?'

'Afraid so. And my Scottish-Gaelic is shite. Like, non-existent really. I think Hendrix can speak it though. I'll ask him to have a look.'

'Found anything new about the Veil at least?' I ask. 'I know you can't be specific. But anything that may be helpful?'

He gestures for me to follow him to the back of the stacks where he's made a little office of sorts. A corner he's claimed as his own. There are post-it notes, photocopies, diagrams and open books covering every inch of the wall, floor and the big oak desk that

Grayson moved in there for him. There are coffee mugs, empty biscuits packets and plates dotted around the place, and he has to dig for the other pages we have to decipher.

He starts rummaging.

‘For a genius, your organisational skills are dreadful,’ I laugh.

‘Where did I put...’ he mutters, throwing books out the way. ‘Aha.’ He holds out a bundle of papers. ‘So... So far, we know that Rebecca Hooper used three spells to create the Veil. Each spell created a lock which we need to “turn”.’

‘Whatever the hell that means.’

‘Well...’ He peers past me, making sure we are out of earshot, and then leans in closer, talking in a whisper. ‘I found mention of three keys. Here.’ He hands me a sheet of my notes written in a language I can’t understand. ‘This part here says that there are three keys that fit into three locks.’

‘Like... A Yale? Or a Chubb?’

‘No,’ he laughs hard and even snorts. ‘Witches didn’t use Yale keys to create spells.’

‘Okay. Don’t break a rib, Connor. Not that funny. How am I supposed to know?’

But he clutches his side as he continues giggling. ‘Sorry. Sorry. Anyway.’ He shakes off the urge to continue his hysteria. ‘Where was I? Right. There’s a phrase here. “Lapis Pretiosus”. That’s Latin. Precious stones. And then here...’ He starts digging in more piles of papers. When he finds it, he thrusts it in my hands. ‘She mentions an heirloom. Something close to her heart, and the heart of her power.’

‘Well that makes no sense. Three keys to turn three locks. Some kind of precious stones. And an heirloom kept close to her heart. Great.’

‘No. No. Separate things. One heirloom. Something close to her heart and then something about the heart of her power.’

‘You know, you’re not supposed to tell me that. You could get in trouble with Grayson.’

‘I’ll tell yer what I can, Lilly. After all, we’re friends, right?’

‘Right.’ I grin back

‘Well, we still have a few pages left to go through today, but this is definitely the section we’ve been looking for. We’re super close now, Lilly. I can feel it. Yer ready to crack on?’

I perch on the edge of a very cluttered armchair while un-wedging a half-eaten pop tart from under my arse.

‘Ready when you are, Connor.’

Gabriel comes in soon after we started. As promised, he hands me several boxes of cookies and tells me Grayson wanted to discuss the next session of Nomad interrogations. He greets Connor with a hug, muttering something into his ear as he does. Connor nods and mutters something back. As we all get to work, I ask Gabriel what he said to him.

‘Just asking if you’re alright.’ He shrugs, before swiftly changing the subject. ‘So, what have we got today?’

After a while, Connor take the pages Gabriel transcribes for me to the stacks down below on the other side of the library and gets to work on figuring out what language they are in. Still under the watchful eye of Ste and Jez, I continue reading more pages aloud as Gabriel scribbles the words down for me. The sun sets. The sound of the owls begin. And the house falls into the eerie quiet all houses plunge into when almost everyone inside is asleep.

‘I’m calling it a night, Lilly,’ Connor calls up to us. ‘I’ll give Grayson the last page on my way. See yer in the mornin’.

‘Night, Connor,’ I call down.

‘Night, Gabriel.’

‘Night, mate.’ When the door closes, he leans back in his chair so he can see round the stacks to get a clear line of sight at the clock by the door. ‘Christ. It’s two in the morning. Come on, Beautiful. You need to sleep too.’ He stands with a stretch.

‘Gabriel?’

‘Yeah?’ he yawns.

I hold up the page I’ve been looking at for the last five minutes. Now Connor has gone and Jez and Ste are half asleep down below, I can finally show Gabriel what I’ve found.

‘What?’ he asks, kneeling beside me to get a closer look. ‘You found something?’

‘Yeah. I think I have actually. You see that image?’ I point to the seven-pointed star in the top right-hand corner.

‘It’s the Arcane star,’ he says casually. ‘Rebecca doodled it on loads of the pages. So what?’

‘Yeah. But look. It’s an Arcane star with a triangle in the centre. Does that mean anything to you?’ I run my finger over it. His eyes are still narrowed as he shakes his head. ‘Gabriel. My mum’s necklace? The one I lost at my uncle’s house? It was a seven-pointed star with a triangle in the centre. Exactly like this. And earlier, Connor said he found something about an heirloom.’

‘You think Rebecca was talking about your mum’s necklace? I mean, makes sense. You said it was passed down from mother to child. But what about the “precious stones”? Were there diamonds in it?’

‘Right in the centre was a deep red jewel. Like a ruby or something. The necklace could be what Rebecca was talking about. It might be essential to the spell!’ I jump to my feet but stumble and sway when I do. ‘Whoa. Stood up too fast.’ I go dizzy and he quickly gets to his feet to keep me on mine. ‘Bloody hell. What’s wrong with me? Has he drugged me again?’

‘You need sleep. And you need more in your belly than a few sodding cookies. I’m taking you to bed.’

‘We’re so close to getting out of here! If we lower the veil and you can get the full strength of your Mental magic back, you can take control of Grayson and get my-’

His hand slams over my mouth. ‘Are you insane?!’ he hisses. ‘If anyone hears our plan, all hell will break loose! Do you want Amara’s head to be delivered to you instead of her finger?’

‘Sorry,’ I whisper beneath the firm pressure of his hand. He peels it away and double checks no one else can hear us.

‘Yes, when I get full access to my magic again, I may be able to take control of him long enough to get your Bloodstone back. But if he thinks that I would dare, he may decide to Brand me too. At the moment, he needs all the witches he can get. He can’t protect you on his own and he knows it. Not with Theo, Jensen, Toby and the Hunters out there. Not to mention whoever tried to shoot you three months ago.’

My eyes flick to his chest and the scar that still remains.

‘If Grayson decides I’m a bigger threat than an asset, we’re both fucked. So don’t talk about it out here, okay?’

I nod.

‘Now. Let’s get some rest and we can tell Grayson in the morning. I swear to you, after a couple of hours sleep and a decent breakfast, we can tell him.’

‘No, we-’

‘Goddamn it. Why do you have to argue with me over every little thing? You can’t even stand, you’re so exhausted.’

‘I’m fine.’

He lets me go. And I fall to the floor like a sack of spuds. His eyes go black as he looks down at me lying at his feet. ‘Go to sleep, Lilly.’

‘Fucking prick,’ I mumble on the edge of consciousness.

‘That’s me alright,’ he sighs, scooping me up in his arms as my eyes start to close. ‘Look at me. Daring to take care of you. What a complete prick I am.’

‘Love you,’ I yawn.

‘Love you more.’

‘Im-po-si...’

'You can't have a baby.'
'Please... Toby, please... Don't do this!'
'I have to. You'll die if I don't!'
'NO! GOD NO! STOP!'

I scream so loud, I think it's the pain in my throat that wakes me. Not the sound.

'It's alright.' Gabriel's voice is a forced calm as he tries to stop my violent flailing. 'Hey, hey, Lilly, it's all okay. You're okay, Beautiful. Wake up.'

My eyes open and fretful tears spill out. He has one hand gripping my wrists above my head, the other holding my face so the first thing he makes sure I see is him.

'Easy, Beautiful. You don't want to hurt yourself. You're okay, it was just a nightmare.' He eases his grip on my wrists so I can fling my arms around his neck and sink into his chest. 'Was it him again? The barn?'

All I can manage is a slight nod as I remain buried in his chest. His strong arms cradle me as his warm lips kiss the crown of my head.

'I wish I could take your pain away,' he whispers sadly.

'You can.' I need him. I need his touch. His embrace. His kiss. His love. I move quick so I'm astride him and pull off his top.

He whispers my name, making it sound more beautiful than any other mouth to ever have said it.

We lock in a fiery, passionate embrace. He almost tears off my clothes, desperate for his skin to be on mine. His hands explore my every curve. They move knowingly and skillfully as he keeps me as close as possible. His fingers glide over the scars that mark my body. His smell intoxicates me. Vanilla and sandal wood. It fills me completely. But he's not soft with me. He's not gentle. He's firm. Demanding. He wants me and he knows I want him too. I'm not made of glass. And he never treats me as such. Not when we're together.

When we're together... We're everything we need.



He falls asleep in my arms. My dear, sweet man.

My Gabriel.

The last few months, he's started having nightmares too. Mumbling

his brother's names in fear or anger. Sobbing mine and apologising for what he did with Ava. I hate hearing her name. But I'm sure he hates hearing Toby's which I know I scream plenty.

I have to get my head back in the game. Pull myself back together. I have to finish working. Get the journal translated and lower the Veil. Only then do we stand a chance at being free. I slide out from under his weight. He shifts and mumbles my name, but settles and drifts back off to sleep. Tonight, he seems restful. No bad dreams. Not for him anyway. I pull on one of his hoodies, a pair of my shorts, and sneak out the door to talk to Ste. He's out on the landing with Jez.

'Miss Hooper. What can I do for you?' he sighs in aggravation.

'There are some papers Grayson needs to see,' I tell him. 'They're in the library. On-'

'Not your personal postman.' He shrugs.

'Well... If I go and get them you have to come anyway so-'

'Then let's go.' He steps aside, looking down at my bare legs. 'I am a fan of watching you walk around in those little shorts.'

I bite my tongue, and walk ahead. Jez has to stay put because Gabriel is still asleep. I reach the library and head inside as Ste remains by the door, waiting.

Connor's organised chaos is still up in the gallery. I pick up the papers with the intention of taking them to Grayson.

No need.

He's coming to me.

I feel his magic getting closer with every one of his footsteps. It's horrible and gets worse every day. It's an aggressive and smothering sensation. Like it just wants to cover me entirely. To possess me.

I look below and see Grayson order Ste to leave the room. When the door closes and it's just us alone, I instantly regret coming here.

Grayson heads up the metal staircase. When he reaches Connor's corner, he stops and watches me while he leans against the stacks in a light grey t-shirt and a pair of joggers.

'Miss Hooper. Tell me, what are you doing up so late?'

'I wanted to show you-'

But whatever I have to say pales in comparison to whatever he has on his mind as he cuts me off completely. 'Gabriel tells me he has a lead on your cousin.'

'Yeah. I know,' I reply, completely disinterested. 'I think you should see-'

'He thinks Junior is in Mexico, of all places.'

'I know. Gabriel told me. Grayson, listen-'

'Funny thing is, he's changed his name and kept off the grid. If it is him, that is.'

'I know, Grayson.' I know where this is going. The same place it

always goes when we're alone. 'Gabriel told me. He tells me everything.'

I do my best to ignore the small laugh he lets out. 'I love how naive you are.' He pushes himself away from the bookshelves and slowly makes his way towards me. 'You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen,' he whispers longingly, 'Do you know that?'

'So you've said. But I think that when you look at me, all you see is the magic you've stolen from me.'

'Your magic is within your grasp, sweetheart. I told you that you can have your Bloodstone back if you accepted my offer.'

I lean forward and look into his eyes to make sure he sees the severity in my every word. 'I will die before I agree to give you a child.' He reaches out and runs his fingers through my hair. I go to move but he grips it and yanks me back to him. His face hardens. 'Move away from me and Amara Jayne loses another finger.' His threat has me still and his fingers release their violent hold on my hair. His features soften instantly once he has his way, and he watches his hands stroke me affectionately. His other hand rests on my throat and he places each one of his fingers over my bruises with precision and care. I work hard to suppress the shudders him being anywhere near me produces. 'I wonder, if I threatened to kill Amara unless you agreed to give me a child, what would you do?'

'I've already said. I'd kill myself.'

'Even if it meant her dying too?'

'It would be hard for me to care, being dead and all.' I swallow down my fear and take a breath. 'You promised Gabriel that you would look for Junior to further my bloodline and that you would leave me alone. So how about you take a few steps back and-' His hand tightens once more around my neck, grasping me precisely where his fingers had previously left dark marks on my skin. It's just a warning.

'Yes, I did promise that,' he snarls. 'And I will keep my word. As long as Gabriel finds him of course. It's been three months and nothing.' He leans in close and says in a low menacing tone, 'So maybe you should show me some respect. I would hate for our time together, making our child, to be unpleasant for you.'

'You'll be fucking a corpse. I think you're the one that will find it unpleasant. Or I dunno. Maybe necrophilia is your thing,' I snipe, lifting my head and refusing to cower. 'You can tighten your grip. Hell, you can snap my neck. You and I will *never* happen.'

I'm released with a shove, forced backwards into the armchair hard and he lunges forwards, slamming his hands down on the arms either-side of me.

'Why is Junior hiding?' he asks suspiciously. 'By all accounts, after

he left, your uncle was far from interested in tracking him down. So why hide? Why run? Why disappear?’

‘He stole Harry’s money and ran off. Harry was a bastard. A cruel bastard. Wouldn’t surprise me if he wanted revenge.’

‘Did Junior know about us? About his magical heritage?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Lilly,’ he warns, leaning in further and pushing me deeper into the chair. ‘Tell me.’

‘I told you everything I know, Grayson. You *and* Gabriel. All of it. I told you the names of the friends he had. I told you in detail what he looks like. I sat with that sketch artist for days. I looked through photos. I gave you my D.N.A. I have done everything you and Gabriel have asked to help find him. Trust me. I want him found because frankly, the alternative makes me *want* to die.’

He stands, but I remain sunken into the cushions.

‘Did you two get on?’ he asks.

‘He pretended like I didn’t exist. He barely looked at me.’

He watches me in silence as he always does when he’s trying to figure out if I’m lying or not. I don’t flinch. I hold my composure.

‘You know, finding your cousin is the only way I let you go.’

‘I know, Grayson.’

‘Whatever my sadistic little brother did to you in that barn, he wasn’t successful.’

‘I know, Grayson. I was there when I had the hundreds of tests you forced me to have. I heard the results.’

Toby tried to destroy my fallopian tubes after he beat me. That’s what those nasty scars are on my belly. He stabbed me and then used his fire to cauterise the wounds. But he failed, and one of them is still in working order.

There’s a chance – a very slim chance – that I can have a baby with the remaining tube. And unless we find Junior - Harry’s son - I’m having a baby as soon as the veil is down.

Grayson’s baby.

Over my dead body.

Gabriel’s too, according to him. He swore to me that he would never let that happen. And the severity in his eyes as he made that vow is something I trust implicitly. He’s been working hard to find Junior. Harder than Grayson, who has barely been looking in my opinion. It’s Gabriel who brought in the private investigators. Gabriel who has Nomads scouring the country and far beyond. If we can give him Junior, lower the veil, get my Bloodstone back and disappear, we’re hoping he’ll just leave us alone.

Who knows. Miracles do happen.

‘You do recall that Toby had a vision of my death? That I was

pregnant and I died?’

‘We don’t know what he saw and until I see it for myself, I’m not stopping until I have secured your lineage. Do you not care that you may be the very last Arcane Witch ever to exist?’ he asks in sheer disbelief.

‘No,’ I reply. ‘I wouldn’t wish an ounce of the cruelty I’ve suffered, on another person. Especially my own flesh and blood.’

‘So,’ he sneers, and I know he’s about to be cruel. He gets this look in his eye. A dark kind of joy that Toby also used to get. ‘Bias did you a favour then, I suppose? Snuffing out the life growing inside of you with his boot-’

I’m on my feet and going for him before I can think twice. I strike him hard. He falls backwards, taking me with him. His back crashes onto Connor’s desk. Books and papers fall to the floor. Now my fingers are folded around *his* throat, and I squeeze hard. As hard as I can.

And the fucker just laughs. Which makes me scream in frustration. I want to hurt him. I need to hurt him! But I can’t. I’m too small. Too weak. Too tired. But that doesn’t stop me from trying. I whack his head into the desk again and again, bellowing without restraint. He simply takes hold of my wrists and calmly, slowly, he bends them backwards. He carries on till I fall off him. He keeps bending. Pushing. Twisting. I’m forced to my knees as he returns to his feet. His breathing is slow and deep as he tries to keep his raging emotions in check.

On the floor and grunting against the pain he’s inflicting, I wait. It’s all I can do unless I want my wrist broken again.

‘Grayson, you’re hurting me.’

‘I’ll do more than hurt you if you attack me like a feral bitch ever again.’

‘You’ll kill me? Then who will do your spell?’ I jeer.

‘I won’t kill you,’ he says through gritted teeth. ‘I will kill Amara though. And I’ll lock up Gabriel and Collins. I’ll chop them into pieces and carve up their flesh. And every day, Gabriel will know that somewhere, I’ll have you tied down with a gag in your mouth. Just as I found you. But this time, it won’t be a cellar you never leave. It will be my bed. Now...’ He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. When he exhales, he opens them once more. ‘How about you tell me what you are doing in here at this late hour.’

He tosses me away from him and sits himself down on the chair.

‘I don’t have all night, Miss Hooper.’

I get myself to my feet and pick up the papers I dropped on the floor after I went for him. I hold out the page with the picture of the seven-pointed star and the triangle behind it and explain what we know.

After a few minutes of silent contemplation, he gets to his feet.

‘Come with me,’ he orders, taking my hand and pulling me after him. We head out of the library, past Ste, and down to his office. Once in there, he scours the shelves lining the walls before pulling out a thick leather-bound album. He places it on the desk and delicately starts looking through its pages. They’re paintings. Old portraits, judging by the gowns the subjects are wearing. Grayson stops on a page and turns it to face me.

My breath catches in my throat when I see the painting he has presented.

‘Is that Rebecca Hooper?’ I ask.

‘It most certainly is.’

Before I realise, I’ve sat down and pulled the painting close. She was beautiful. Her long red hair falls in waves down her back just as mine does. She holds herself with poise and authority. She certainly looks like a force to be reckoned with. Just as Gabriel described. Her mouth curves the same as mine does. But her eyes, they are the spitting image of my mothers, not my emerald green. Grayson leans over and taps the nape of her neck.

‘Is that your mother’s necklace?’ he asks.

I lean in closely. But there really is no need for me to do so. It’s very distinguishable. It’s a beautiful seven pointed star made of white gold with a red jewel in the very centre. Yellow gold is laced over the top of the jewel in the form of a triangle, holding it in place. It all knots together intricately. The star. The triangle. The red stone. Exactly as I remember it.

‘Yes,’ I reply. ‘That’s it.’ I softly caress the painting of the only thing my mother ever gave me as if it’s really here and I could feel it between my fingers. But all I feel is paint on canvas.

‘So, that is the heirloom Rebecca used for the spell.’ He speaks quietly and to himself.

Grayson sends for Connor with his next breath. Connor wanders into Grayson’s office rubbing his eyes and yawning, still in his pj’s.

‘What’s going on, Lilly? I was fast asleep.’

‘Well, you’re not here to sleep, Mr Quinn,’ Grayson replies curtly. Hearing his voice, Connor wakes up very quickly, looking the deer very much in headlights. He looks around and suddenly realises where he is. Part of me wonders if he even opened his eyes while he was led down here.

‘Oh, Sir, I-I didn’t realise... I thought... I apologise. Truly.’

‘Here.’ Grayson holds out the page with the star diagram and explains exactly what we have found so far. ‘Get to work, Mr Quinn. I need to know if this necklace is involved in the spell. Now.’

Connor gives a small bow and scurries upstairs. But not without a

worried look over his shoulder as I remain stuck in Grayson's office. With a flick of his wrist, Grayson closes the door and turns back to me.

'So, where's your mother's necklace now?'

'You know I don't know that. I almost burnt to death the night we met trying to find it.'

'When did you lose it?'

'Sometime in the missing six-weeks I'm guessing. I had it when Toby left. It was gone when I woke up in the cellar.'

He goes quiet and disappears into himself thinking. 'Bias must have it,' he concludes. His eyes flick up to mine. 'Bias had the journal for a while before you two parted ways two years ago. I bet he saw that symbol and the resemblance it held to your necklace. I'd bet this house and everything inside it that he has it now. He probably took it to try and attempt the spell himself. Or force you to do it for him.'

'We can't know that. The necklace could have burnt up the night you found me. Harry could have had it hidden somewhere or he could have just binned it out of spite.'

'Well, other than Bias, there's only one other person alive who may know where it is.'

'Who?' I ask.

'You of course.'

'But I can't remember anything that happened. You know that.'

I feel him coming. Running. Gabriel's magic shrouds me in a warm protective glow that pushes away the hostility of Grayson's aura. Gabriel's awake and he's heading this way.

Thank God.

The door opens and he comes right on in, taking his place by my side as I remain in the chair facing Grayson. He's a little out of breath but hides it well. Gabriel takes my hand and glares at his brother.

'Any reason you have my girl locked in your office in the middle of the night?'

'The door was closed, Gabriel. Not locked.' Grayson smirks at him. 'Tone down the dramatics, would you?'

'You alright, Beautiful?' he asks, not breaking eye contact with his brother.

'Fine.' I get to my feet and his arm furls around me so he can pin me to his side. I sink into his frame. 'I'm fine.'

'I'm taking her back to bed,' Gabriel states, heading towards the door. Which seals shut before we get anywhere close.

'Not yet.'

We both turn. I feel Gabriel go rigid by my side. Nothing good is about to happen and he's preparing for a fight.

'What do you want?' Gabriel asks.

‘We need to find her mother’s missing necklace. Rebecca hinted that a family heirloom was involved in the spell. Something with a precious stone. Her mother’s necklace is the same necklace Rebecca wore. I want to know exactly what happened to Miss Hooper in those six missing weeks of hers so we can discover where the necklace went.’

My insides plummet as I grip on to Gabriel even tighter.

‘You managed to prize a glimpse of what happened to her before. You saw blood and death in that barn. So, you will do it again. I need to know where her mother’s missing necklace went. And you, dear brother, are going to search her mind until you find out.’

‘Grayson...’ I barely have a voice as I come to terms with what he’s asking. No. Demanding. ‘I can’t. Please. Don’t make me watch Toby do that to me again. I already relive it every night.’

‘And you’ll relive it every day until I find that necklace.’

Gabriel looks down at me with the solemnest of faces. We both know that we can’t refuse. Not unless we want pain and misery for our friends.

‘Okay,’ Gabriel says. ‘I’ll look.’

‘Gabriel, I can’t. Please-’

‘Yes, you can. Because you have to. Whatever it takes, remember?’ His hand settles on my cheek and he shows me his best attempt at a reassuring smile. ‘I’ll be right by your side the entire time. And-’

‘GRAYSON?!’ Connor bellows from upstairs. Grayson uses his magic to open his office door. We all turn and look into the empty entrance hall. ‘GRAYSON! I’VE FOUND SOMETHING!’ Connor’s voice is excited and has Grayson charging off out the room. Gabriel doesn’t give a damn as he returns his full attention to me.

‘Did he hurt you?’ He starts examining me, running his hands along my arms and finally settling his eyes on my throat.

‘A little. Nothing bad. He lost his temper when I reminded him that I won’t have his children. That’s all.’

‘Connor woke me up and told me you were down here with him. He said you looked like you needed backup.’

‘Remind me to thank him later.’

‘Well you shouldn’t have gone downstairs on your own in the first place,’ he snaps. ‘Why would you?’

‘I didn’t think. I can’t look into my memories, Gabriel. Last time I saw what happened, I almost gave into my Break. I can’t-’

‘We’ll look. As far as he knows, we’ll look. But we won’t find anything. Okay? We’ll lie. Simple. We’ll find the necklace a different way. I’m not risking losing you to your Break. The Veil can stay up for all I care. I am *not* losing you.’ He’d obviously decided that as soon as the request was made.

‘We need to lower the Veil. How else are we ever going to get away from here?’

‘Look, let’s just focus on one ridiculous problem at a time, okay? It won’t matter if we get away or not if you’re not you anymore, will it? Your life. Your sanity. Your freedom. We’ll get it all. Somehow.’ He brushes it off with a wave of his hand. ‘Come on. Let’s go see what Connor’s found.’ I take his hand and we head on up.

Back in the library, Connors talking quickly and waving his arms dramatically. Whatever he’s found must be good. His eyes land on us briefly and settle on my hand in Gabriel’s before I snatch it away, forgetting for a moment that we’re not allowed to be together out in public.

‘I’m pretty sure he knows about us,’ Gabriel whispers in my ear. ‘I mean, he did come and fetch me when he left you alone with Grayson.’

‘Well, I’m not risking it. Grayson will take any excuse to hurt us. What do you think he’s found?’

He merely shrugs and heads over, me following close behind. But Grayson and Connor are charging back down the metal staircase towards us. Papers and books fill Connor’s arms. Grayson doesn’t even acknowledge us as he leaves, his nose buried in paperwork.

‘Do we follow?’ I ask. ‘What should we do?’

‘We sit.’ Gabriel yawns, slumping down into the nearest chair. ‘Come here. Close your eyes and try to relax.’

‘Oh yeah sure,’ I huff, plonking down on a chair beside him. ‘Relax.’

Like I can relax. The spell is getting closer. Grayson wants Gabriel to dig around in my head again to look for my missing memories. And I’m being threatened to be used as a breeding mare against my will. But sure.

Relax.

‘Want me to read to you?’ he asks.

‘Not in the mood,’ I reply, glancing up at the huge seven-pointed star tapestry hanging pride of place above the fire place. ‘I fucking hate that star.’

‘Yeah. I’m getting to hate it too.’ He looks up at it, his fingers tapping the arm rest. ‘I wonder what Collins is up to?’

I hate seeing how deeply he misses his best friend, and knowing that it’s my fault he’s gone makes it even worse. Collins has been the one he confides in for decades. Centuries. Whenever he needed advice or a sense of reason, Collins was always there. Now he’s gone. Amara too. And we have no idea where they are or if they’re okay.

‘I imagine they’re together. Wondering how we are. Amara’s probably threatening to tear Grayson’s head off the next time she sees

him,' I laugh, seeing it instantly in my head. Her pacing back and forth huffing and puffing out of aggravation, swishing her hair dramatically and slamming her hands on her hips.

Gabriel gives a soft chuckle and turns his head to face me. 'Yeah. I bet. She's a feisty thing, your best friend. And I bet Collins is reminding her, in his usual calm and respectful manner, that there isn't shit she can do but sit quietly and wait. Much like the rest of us.' His hand reaches out and our fingers entwine. We both look back up to the tapestry hanging on the wall.

'I really love you. You know that, right?' I ask him, giving his fingers a gentle squeeze. 'I am so sorry for being responsible for this mess. If it wasn't for me, you would still have both your brothers and your best friend here. If Toby never found me that day by the tree-'

'I don't believe in God. See as much death as I have, you don't. But that doesn't stop me from thanking someone out there that Bias found you that day. I love you, Lilly. You coming into my life is the best thing that has ever happened to me. We just need to get through this nightmare, then we can have our happy ever after. And that's worth wading through the crap for. We're going to get through this.'

'Together.'

'Exactly. Me. You. Amara and Collins. Absofuckinglutely.' He pulls me towards him and settles me in his lap. My head fits perfectly in the crook of his neck and his arms envelop me in a complete embrace.

'Absofuckinglutely,' I yawn, closing my eyes.



We wake to the sound of Hendrix clearing his throat.

'You're wanted,' he grunts, looking at us curled up together. 'In his office. Now.'

'What's going on?' I ask, stretching out my stiff muscles. The sun has risen. It's morning.

'We have the spell,' Hendrix announces, making my heart skip a beat. 'We know how to bring down the Veil.'

'No way...' Gabriel whispers. 'Already?'

'Yep.' Hendrix is smiling. A real, genuine smile without the hint of sarcasm or cruelty which usually contaminates his smirks. Gabriel is on his feet, pushing me up onto mine in the process.

'We have it? We have the spell?' Gabriel repeats, as if he can't believe what he's heard.

Hendrix nods. 'It's time. The Veil is coming down, and magic is about to return.' He looks to me. 'Ready to save thousands of lives, Little Witch?'

‘Rebecca created the Veil using three spells in three separate locations, spread out across the country,’ Connor explains as I linger by the window in Grayson’s office. Grayson gathered us all in here and sealed the door. Only Gabriel, Connor, Hendrix and I are allowed in to hear the details of the spell which will lower the Veil. He doesn’t trust anyone else at all. After all, Toby had spies in the house a few months ago. It’s possible some still remain. Hendrix is by the closed door with a serious frown and folded arms as Grayson and Connor sit opposite each other at Grayson’s desk. I lean against the window and look out the front of the house. There are too many Nomads to count. My breath fogs up the glass as Gabriel stands close by my side.

Connor continues. ‘Each spell created a lock. The locks are what is keeping the Veil in place. We need to unlock them.’

‘And how do we do that?’ Gabriel asks.

Connor pulls out the pages of translation from his pocket and smooths them out. Grayson rolls his eyes as he watches possibly the most important document in his search for a way to bring down the Veil, flattened out like a shopping list pulled from the bottom of a bag. There’s even a coffee ring on it.

‘The journal says, *“Each lock can only be undone by someone who can manipulate all of the realms”*.’ He gestures to me. ‘By that, it means the Arcane.’

I let out a large breath onto the glass and draw a seven-pointed star in the condensation.

‘And what does she need to do to unlock these stones?’ Gabriel asks, his hand resting on my lower back protectively.

‘Well, that’s not particularly clear.’

‘I suggest you make it clear,’ Gabriel adds sharply.

Connor looks down at the page as the brothers watch him intently, trying hard to not be intimidated by the two most intimidating people he knows. He clears his throat. ‘She writes, *“Each stone is a lock. To unlock them you require three keys. An heirloom handed down from mother to child”*. We’re pretty sure that means your mother’s necklace.’ He adds directly to me before returning his attention to the page. ‘It goes on to say, *“The second is a ring, close to my heart”*. That... we’re not too sure about.’

‘Any ideas?’ Grayson asks me, but I shrug, lost in thought.

‘And finally, *“The final stone will require the heart of all power”*.

‘Well, what’s the heart of all power?’ Gabriel asks.

‘No idea,’ Connor sighs, scratching his head. ‘She also mentions a *“challenge to prove worth”*. That the precious stones must be reunited, and a test to prove... well... worth.’ He concludes with a shrug.

‘You know, Lilly...’ Grayson calls over. ‘This kind of concerns you. Maybe you should pay attention and quit doodling.’

I continue looking out at the front of the house, rubbing out the seven-pointed star with my palm and replacing it with a triangle. ‘There are three stones hidden somewhere in England. We need to find them. We also need to find my mother’s necklace and Rebecca’s wedding ring, which act as keys. Reunite the items with the stone, pass a test of some kind, and the Veil will fall. Got it. Not sure what the final key is though. Bit weird that one. Heart of all power? What’s the heart of any witches’ power?’

‘Hang on.’ Gabriel turns me to face him. ‘Rebecca’s wedding ring? Why do you think it would be Rebecca’s wedding ring?’

‘A ring, close to her heart? What else but a wedding ring? You always said how much she loved her husband. Plus...’ I head over to Grayson’s desk where, still lying open and under several sheets of paper, is the portrait of my ancestor, Rebecca Hooper. I tap the place where Rebecca’s hand rests on her lap. On her left hand, sitting on her wedding finger, is a ring with a red stone in its setting. Shaped just like a heart. ‘I have eyes and a good memory. It’s her wedding ring.’

Grayson peers over the desk at where I’m pointing and gives a short, sharp laugh. ‘Well. I’ll be damned.’

‘Where are the stones located?’ I ask Connor.

‘I only know where one is. Dartmoor. She writes that once this stone is defeated, the location of the next one will be shared, as well as a reward.’

‘A reward?’ I ask, my interest certainly peaked. ‘What kind of reward?’

‘No idea. She doesn’t say. She does say the key for the first lock is the ring, close to her heart. So, her wedding ring. Assuming you’re correct of course.’

‘Could you be more specific? I mean, Dartmoor’s pretty big.’

‘I can get you there,’ he assures me. ‘Rebecca left clues. Landmarks and such. Give me a couple of days and I can figure it out.’

I direct my next question to Grayson. ‘Where’s her wedding ring?’

‘No idea.’

That’s not what I wanted to hear.

‘So, what do we do now? Shall we go find the stone in Dartmoor? Bring it back here?’

‘Just give me a second to think, Lilly. Okay?’ Grayson takes Connors notes and leans back in his chair, tapping his finger on his desk. He remains quiet as we all wait.

‘Excuse me,’ Gabriel says sharply, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. ‘Or am I the only one that heard the whole, “*Test to prove worth*” part of this? What the hell does that mean? Because that, to me, sounds dangerous.’

‘Of course it will be dangerous,’ I reply. ‘It’s a test.’

‘Then we need to find out more before we do anything,’ Gabriel insists, speaking directly to Grayson and not to me. ‘We need to translate the rest of the journal. Find out exactly what these tests entail so she can prepare for them.’

‘She’s not going to have anything written about the test in the journal, is she? Would kind of defeat the point,’ I bite back sharply, annoyed at how he’s cutting me out of the conversation. ‘We need to find the ring. Find the stone in Dartmoor. And get on with it.’

‘You also need all seven-realms of power,’ Grayson reminds me. ‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.’ He sits back in his chair, his eyes unfocused and distant as he thinks. ‘The last person to see Rebecca was Theo. He went on and on about how he held her in his arms after she died.’ He starts clicking his tongue still lost in thought. ‘Tradition was burning back then. He wouldn’t have buried her.’

‘You think the ring was burnt?’ I feel panic rise up through my chest. Surely this can’t be the end of it. If the key is destroyed... what then? But he shakes his head, still locked in a far-off stare with the ceiling.

‘Items infused with magic can’t be destroyed by anything mortal.’ After a moment, Hendrix clears his throat. When I look at him, he’s still lingering by the door but looking weird. Guilty maybe? Definitely uncomfortable.

‘Hendrix?’ Grayson asks slowly. ‘What is it?’

‘Well...’ Again, he clears his throat. ‘I err...’ He clears throat again.

‘Spit it out,’ Grayson warns.

‘I know where the ring is,’ he replies quickly. ‘Well, I know where it went after Hooper died at any rate.’ I don’t understand why this revelation has him looking so on edge. This is great news!

‘You do, hmm?’

‘Yes, Boss. I err... I stole it.’

‘You *stole* it?’ Grayson leans forwards, resting his elbows on his desk.

‘Yes, Boss. Theo burnt her body. After he left and when the fire started to die down I kind of... well... I pissed on her and found the ring in her ashes.’

‘You took a piss on the burning body of my ancestor?!’ I yell, disgusted.

‘You defiled the remains of the most powerful witch to ever exist?’ Grayson snarls angrily. ‘And stole from her still burning body?’

'You're disgusting,' I hiss. 'And seriously fucked up.'

'I sold it. Alright? Look. I know what I did was wrong.'

Grayson is on his feet so fast his chair slides backwards across the floor. Gabriel stands directly in front of me as a barrier, but it's not me Grayson is after. Hendrix shuffles backwards looking frightened which isn't an emotion I have ever seen on him before.

'You stole from my coven?!' Grayson bellows. 'You took an item that belonged to an Arcane Witch without my permission?! That ring should have been given to me. It was rightfully mine. But you stole it and sold it?'

The room falls silent and I'm sure I feel the temperature drop as his icy demeanor appears.

'I'm sorry. I was new to your coven and didn't know the rules.'

'Don't lie to me, vampire. You knew the rules well enough. You are a thief. And your treachery may well cost us our freedom.'

'But I know who I sold it to,' he insists. 'Boss. I can track it down. I'll get it back. I swear to you.'

'You will tell me everything and I will find it. Then, you will stay out of my sight until I find myself in a better mood. Lest you find yourself on my vindictive side. Understood?'

Hendrix bows down low. 'Yes, Boss.' He remains head down as Grayson turns to Gabriel.

'While I look for the ring, I suggest you start digging around in that head of hers and find that necklace. In the meantime, she has three more realms of magic she needs to manifest.'

'So how long do you think until we can do the spell?' I ask desperately. I need to get out of here. It's been three months already. I can't take any more.

'However long it takes for you to manifest the remainder of your abilities.'

'Actually...' Connor says, as I go to complain. 'The journal only says that the one who can use all seven-realms. Not has access to all seven-realms. Might be that it just means an Arcane in general has to do the spell. Not a fully formed Arcane.' He looks at me and we both know he's grasping at straws. But he knows how desperate I am to get out of here. And he's so keen to help me.

I pipe up too. 'It won't be long until Toby comes back for me. Theo too. They know where we are. They will know we have the journal. If they don't already. If Theo gets to me first, he'll either use me to do his spell and kill all the Descendants, or he'll just finish what he started and kill me. And if I ever see Toby again, one of us will kill the other. Of that, I'm certain. Of that... I promise.'

'Your point, Miss Hooper?'

'I think we should find the ring. Find the stone. Get me to it and

just see what happens. Before someone comes to try and kill me, or Hunters come to butcher us all.'

'Gabriel? What do you think?' he asks. 'Do you think we should "*get her to it and see what happens*"?'

I hate how every word dripped with sarcasm. I turn and give Gabriel the best – take my side - glare I can muster.

His head moves from Grayson to me a good few times before they settle on me apologetically. 'We have no idea if you're ready to face anything this test could throw at you. And you're not even fully formed yet.'

'And we won't know until we try and do it. Will we? Like Connor said, I might not need to be fully formed. It might just mean that it has to be an Arcane to do it.'

'I know. I do. But you have to think logically here. You spent two years chained to a wall in a pitch-black room. You're still recovering from that. And then there's over a decade of malnutrition. Not to mention the emotional trauma and nightmares that continue to keep you awake most nights. Three months ago, you almost died of blood poisoning after what Theo did to your fingers. All that takes time to recover from. You're not ready to face anything Rebecca could throw at you.'

'I've had time to recover.'

'Three months is not enough time,' he states. 'You could die if you do this when you're not ready!'

'I'll die if I have to stay here for much longer.'

'Everyone out. I need to talk to Gabriel alone,' Grayson says firmly. As everyone else heads to the door, I remain by Gabriel's side. 'That includes you, Miss Hooper. NOW!' With a slight twitch of his hand, the door flies open and he nods towards it. As I remain, he furrows his eyes and lowers his tone. 'You go willingly. Or Hendrix will drag you out. Choose.'

'This concerns me, Grayson. I'm telling you I'm ready. I'm ready! Let me try!'

'Just go, Lilly,' Gabriel asks, in that tired, pleading voice I've come to hear all too often. Especially when he's trying to stop me from pissing off his psycho brother.

'I'm not leaving you alone with him.'

Gabriel takes my hands. His eyes go black. 'Go wait for me upstairs.'

I leave, compelled by his words and shaking with anger.



'A year?' I say through gritted teeth. 'What the hell do you mean, a

fucking year?

‘Exactly what I just said, Lilly. We have a year to try and get your manifestations to come. Then we try the stone. Grayson and I both think it’s far too premature for us to start this stone business. You’ve barely recovered from everything that happened with Theo and Bias at the Traitor Camp. You’re not ready-’

‘Don’t,’ I snarl. My tears slide down my cheeks and anger climbs up my throat. ‘Don’t you dare tell me what I am or am not ready for, Gabriel. How could you take his side?’

‘I will when it’s his side that will keep you alive.’ He takes a step towards me. I take a step back and he stops. ‘I won’t apologise for trying to protect you. This test will be dangerous. You need to be ready.’

‘I am ready.’

‘No. You’re angry. You’re hurting. You’re afraid and desperate. That’s far from ready.’

‘You have no idea what I am. Or how I’m feeling. Clearly!’ My voice is getting louder as the anger inside begins to grow. ‘Say it. Tell me you are absolutely positive that this is *your* idea.’ I wait, and hope he says the code word that means not to trust his words. But he shakes his head.

‘I’m absofuckinglutely positive that this is the right thing to do.’

‘I thought we were a team. We agreed that we would stick together. No matter what. A united front against him.’

‘And we are. But your way puts you in danger. And I will not let you put yourself in danger. Not for Grayson, Theo or Bias. Not for this fucking spell.’

‘For your brothers and your dad, you mean,’ I hiss hatefully, loathing that the man I love is related to the men I hate more than anyone else on the planet.

‘I didn’t choose my family, Lilly,’ he bites back, getting just as angry. ‘Like you didn’t choose yours. And I don’t choose them now. I choose you. I choose to do what I must to keep you alive. Even if that means agreeing with Grayson that we wait a year to get your magic-’

I start to laugh at the horrendousness of the situation while grabbing at my hair and shaking my head. More tears spill down my face as I fall into a pit of despair. I had hope. For a fleeting moment, I had hope. And now it’s gone. Gabriel’s taken it.

‘No. No way. You know how much I want to leave. I won’t wait a year. I won’t.’

‘I want you alive.’ He shrugs. ‘That’s more important than what you want.’

‘To you. Not to me.’ He flinches at the words. ‘Gabriel, I swear to God, I’m trying hard not to lose my shit altogether. If you don’t-’

‘What? Fall into line? Do as I’m told? You’re sounding very Grayson like.’

I walk up to him and glare furiously into his face.

‘I’m telling you this once. I am not staying in this house for a year with a man that drugged me, tied me down and branded me. With a man that wants to impregnate me against my will.’

‘That’s never going to happen. I’ve told you. If I don’t find Junior soon, I’ll get you somewhere that can finish what Bias started.’

‘His name... is Toby! And oh yeah. How could I forget. My boyfriend’s plan to have me sterilised before his brother can knock me up. Perfect. Every girls fucking dream.’

‘I’m doing my fucking best!’ he snaps back. ‘What the hell else can I do?’

‘YOU CAN LET ME DO THE SPELL!’ I scream. He flinches. But not in fear or surprise. He’s getting angry with me and trying to keep his temper in check. Unlike me. ‘Toby has already got into The Orchard once. Nomads who could be his men may very well be walking about. Do you know what he’ll do to me if he gets half the chance? He won’t take my rejection or the fact I burnt up his face lightly. Never mind Theo and Jensen. They’ll come. I’m amazed they haven’t already! We’re sitting ducks, Gabriel. It’s madness that we are all still here in the first sodding place.’

‘We’re safe-’

‘NO. WE’RE FUCKING NOT!’ I screech, furious at his stupidity. Every muscle in his body is tensed as he fights to remain calm. His fists are balled up. His fingernails digging into his palms. The vein on his neck that rises when he’s close to losing temper completely starts to throb. I take a calming breath. ‘You may not agree. But I don’t care. I’m not staying in this house for a year of his “training sessions”.’ I barge into his shoulder as I head to the door, but as I open it, he reaches over my head and slams it shut. I remain facing the wood as he stands behind me. His hot, angry breath lands on my neck.

He spins me to face him. His eyes swim with anger, but I don’t care. He doesn’t scare me. He annoys the hell out of me. Drives me insane with frustration and anger. But there is never any fear between us. He steps forwards, pushing me into the door and pressing his chest into my body.

‘If you’re trying to intimidate me into submission, you clearly don’t know who you’re dealing with.’

‘I’m not trying to intimidate you. I’m stopping you from leaving this room and starting a fight with a man who will hurt you and take pleasure in doing so. I’m also fighting the urge to throw you onto the bed and tie you up so you can’t leave my sights.’

‘Kinky. But restraints aren’t really my thing,’ I hiss.

‘I know it all seems like a pile of shit right now, but it’s going to get better. We have each other. That’s what matters right now.’

‘Only on the third floor,’ I snap back. ‘I’m not allowed to touch you unless we’re up here. We’re on a knife’s edge, and Grayson could cut us any goddamn second. You keep saying that it’s going to get better.’ I push him away from me. I know that my push only moved him because he let it. ‘But it never does. And it never will, will it? I’m stuck in hell. And you’ve just agreed for me to stay in it for another year. I’ll never be free. Not until I get out of here and complete that spell.’ I turn and pull open the door. He reaches over and closes it again, the door handle slipping through my fingers. ‘Move, Gabriel.’

‘No.’

‘I said, move!’

‘And I said, no!’

I turn and give him another shove. This time he doesn’t budge. It’s like pushing a brick wall. I do it again. And again. Until I’m just pounding on his chest. With ease, he grips my wrists and yanks me away from the door. My feet trip over themselves as he pulls me away, ignoring me screaming obscenities as he does. My knees hit the bed and he pushes me down. I jump back up on my feet. But with a slight push, I’m back on the bed.

‘Sit on the bed and calm the fuck down. You’re not going out there to start a fight with a man who will happily beat you into submission.’

‘You gonna stop me?’ I quip, pushing myself back up. He simply pushes me back down.

‘Believe your fucking arse I’m gonna stop you.’ His eyes go black.

‘If you so much as say a word to me with those black eyes, I will move out of this room and not say a word to you until I do that first stone.’ I lean forwards and stare straight into the blackness. ‘It will be a long, lonely year for you, Gabriel Kendryk. Get the fuck out of my face, you prick.’

His eyes return to their familiar blue but the anger within them is still very much present. ‘I’m doing what’s best for you. I don’t want to stay here any longer than we have to. But I will not allow you to die for the sake of waiting a year.’

Slowly and defiantly, I get to my feet. He’s so close, I have to lean back a little so I don’t end up in his face.

‘I’m going to leave this room,’ I tell him calmly. ‘You’re going to step aside and let me past. And I’m going to tell Grayson that your deal is not happening.’

‘No. You’re not,’ he says in a very forced calm. ‘You can hate me. You can move out of our room. But I will not let you go down there to get hurt, and I will not let you do this spell and walk willingly to your death when I know that with a bit of time, you’ll be more prepared.’

That's the end of it. So, you can stay up here all fucking year if that's what it takes. I will not lose you, Lilly Hooper. Not again.'

'You're such a prick!'

'A prick that loves you and will do whatever I need to do to keep you in one piece.'

He turns and heads to the door. When he leaves and closes it behind him, I hear the click of the lock as I'm sealed in.

'You fucking bastard!'

'Yep.'

With an angry yell, I take off my shoe and hurl it across the room. It bashes into the door with a loud thud. But that's not enough. I toss the bedside lamp too and it shatters on impact, littering the floor with broken china.

'Love you too,' he calls through the door.

'Wow. She has one hell of a temper,' Ste laughs. There's a thump, a groan, and a bang as Ste hits the floor.

'Another word about her, I'll break more than your nose,' Gabriel warns him as he leaves.

∞ ∞ ∞

*He just stands there, grinning, blinking, looking.
He doesn't say a word. But it was never his words that I feared.*

*His presence is more terrifying than anything else because I know what
comes next.*

*And that's worse. The waiting. Knowing it's coming. Knowing what lies
ahead.*

Any minute now. Any second.

That young man with light blonde hair and a cheeky smile.

And that smile will never fade. It will only grow.

The more I struggled. The more I cried. The more I begged.

He just smiled. He just laughed.

He was never angry. He was never frustrated. He was just... glad.

I try to wake myself up. But I can't.

In the real world, I feel the heavy weight of my eyelids that refuse to open.

I'm paralysed. My whole body refusing to listen as I inwardly scream to just... WAKE UP!

Or perhaps I'm dead. And this is hell.

He takes a step closer.

Please, just wake up, Lilly. Just wake up.

Another step. And then another.

He reaches out his hand, within it, a heap of fabric. Bed sheets. All knotted together in a long line with a perfect noose worked into the end.

He nods behind me, I look. There's my uncle's willow tree. And then the noose is in my hands. And he's still grinning.

I blink and I'm on the thick branch. The highest one that I could reach.

I finish tying one end of the sheet around the branch, and slide the noose over my head. He remains below. Still smiling.

I really thought killing myself would get me away from him.

'But really, it just made sure I never left you,' he says aloud.

'T-that's not true.'

'Oh yes, it is. Because I will always be the reason you tried to end your life. I will always be the one that truly made you give up. You may be frightened of the men out there. Of the man who cut off your fingers or that threatens the ones you love. Of the man who snubbed out the life growing inside you. But none of them have made you feel as hopeless as I did. None of them made you want to die.'

'You're dead now, Ryan. You can't hurt me anymore.'

'In here.' He taps his head. 'I'm very much alive. And I can still hurt you. Believe me.'

Suddenly, he's behind me. His elbow jabs into my spine and I fall. But I don't dangle from the branch as I did last time. I land on the floor of my uncle's bathroom. I sit and scurry back as Ryan kicks the door closed behind him, his fingers pulling down his fly as he pens me in. Terrified sobs choke me of breath.

'Take your knickers off, Lills. Or I'll tell the Hunters exactly where to find you.'

I shake my head, tears stream down my face.

'Then I'll just take them off for you!'

I sit up with a start while frantically batting away his arms and kicking away his body. But the room is just as empty as it was when I fell asleep. There's no sign of Ryan, and sadly, no sign of Gabriel. The room is dark. Empty.

I feel dirty. Disgusting and wrong. I hate being in my skin which crawls at the mere memory of that blue-eyed, blonde-haired bastard. My breathing becomes deep gasps which turn into heavy, panicked panting. My stomach turns as I remember the rough and violent touch of his hands on my body. The smell of his breath as he panted in my ear. The way he used to laugh as I cried.

I sprint to the bathroom, narrowly reaching the toilet before I throw up. My ribs grind from my violent heaving. My throat burns. My knuckles turn white as they cling to the edge of the toilet, and once my stomach is empty, I slump against the wall, exhausted and sore. I close my eyes and try to catch my breath. But as soon as my lids seal shut, all I see is his face.

I swiftly reopen them and stare at the ceiling instead. But he's still there. He'll always be there.

'Get out of my head,' I whisper, tapping the back of my head against the wall, hoping to knock the images clear. But they remain. So I hit it harder. And harder. And harder, till my head throbs and I see spots.

I can still hear his voice.

'Get out of my head.'

His laugh echoes in my ears. It drowns out everything else. I start to yell, attempting to drown it out. All the frustration and anger inside me swells and mixes with the self-loathing he creates every time I dream of him and the knocks get harder. The yelling becomes more desperate. I cover my ears but his laugh still deafens me.

‘GET OUT OF MY HEAD!’

WHACK! WHACK!

‘GET OUT! GET OUT!’

WHACK! WHACK!

‘GET OUT!’

‘Hey... HEY!’ Gabriel puts his hand between the back of my head and the wall, taking the full force of my self-inflicted assault and hissing a swear word as his bones crunch. But I keep trying.

Ryan’s too loud. Too vivid.

‘Stop! Stop, baby. Stop!’ I barely notice he’s there as I descend into insanity. I push Gabriel away, and I turn to face the wall.

I pull my head back, hoping to make it all go quiet. Maybe for good. Right now, I don’t know. But I pull my head right back and put every bit of strength I own into hurling my skull into the tiles of the wall.

‘LILLY! NO!’ Gabriel body slams me to the floor and pins me beneath him as I kick and scream. ‘Christ...’ he mutters, trying desperately to hold me down. ‘Jesus, Lilly, calm down! Baby, please... calm down! You’re scaring me!’

‘GET OFF ME! GET OFF ME, RYAN!’

‘Look at me. Look at me!’ Gabriel takes my face in his hands and stares deep into my eyes. ‘He’s not here. He’s not here, Beautiful. You hear me?’ We lock eyes and I blink clear my tears so I can see his concern filled face. ‘He’s not here.’

The sobs that come out of me are so sad and so desperate. I can’t

stay here. I can't face another day. I can't bear the waiting. Waiting for Toby to come for me. For Theo and Jensen. For Hunters. And as I'm feeling all this, the man who ruined me long before they came along is still taunting me.

Gabriel lifts me up and holds me in his arms, repeating the same words. 'He's not here. He's dead, Lilly. Ryan's dead. He can't hurt you anymore.'



Gabriel never takes his eyes off me as he gently wipes my face clean with a wet flannel. I sit still and silent on the edge of the bath as he kneels in front of me. For each silent tear he wipes away, another slides slowly down my cheek.

'Why has this all started?' he asks sadly. 'You said you don't normally dream of him. But in the last few weeks, your nightmares are getting so much worse. I would have thought Bias or Theo would be the issue. Not that... *thing*. Is it because of Junior?'

'Junior?' I whisper sadly. 'Why would Junior matter?'

'Well, we're getting close to finding him. And seeing him might be causing you concern. You know, sparking all those bad memories.'

'Junior didn't know anything about... *that*.'

'Yeah, but he's your family. He's the son of the man who locked you away. Maybe.'

'It's not him. It's everything else.' I sigh and our foreheads meet. 'I thought I had my shit together more than this. You must be so disappointed.'

He takes my chin and looks up at me sternly. 'I am not disappointed in you. You say that again, and that is what will make me disappointed in you.' He waits for me to argue with his eyebrows raised expectantly. He seems satisfied when I give a small nod. 'And no more hurting yourself, okay? The hitting your head. The clawing at the brand.' He takes my palm and opens it flat so he can see the crescent shapes that I've dug into my skin over and over while I try and hold my tongue with Grayson. I didn't think he'd noticed that. But he had. 'This. It needs to stop. I mean it.'

‘Don’t be mad. I’m trying not to be a crazy lunatic.’

‘You daft mare. I’m not mad. I’m not under any illusions about just how crazy you are either.’ The corners of his mouth twitch as he teases me.

‘You’re supposed to tell me I’m not mad, you know.’

‘No more lies, remember? You are completely and utterly bonkers, Lilly Hooper. You have more baggage than Gatwick airport. But you know what?’

‘What?’

‘I’m not exactly sane either. So how about we be crazy, baggage laden, fools together?’ His smile grows when he spots my own starting to appear. The git. Only he could make light of any of this. He settles his hands on my thighs and rises himself up to my level, his knees still on the floor. ‘And know this. I love every single nutty, cuckoo, bat-shit-bonkers part of you. You’re not on your own and I swear to you, I will die before I let any harm come to you. From Theo, Jensen, Bias, Grayson...’ He taps my temple. ‘Even yourself. Hear me?’

I slide off the edge of the bath, straight into his lap where he cradles me.

‘I know it’s tempting to jump in and give the spell a go. But going in too soon and dying in whatever this “*test of worth*” is, won’t get you your freedom. It will just get you dead.’

‘You think that Grayson will leave us alone for the year while I train?’ I ask disbelievingly. ‘You think he’ll stop with the violence and the threats? You think Amara and Collins will be safe?’ I’m met with silence and uncertainty. ‘Didn’t think so.’

‘You know what we’re going to do when this is all over?’ he asks, his chin settling on the crown of my head as his arms hold me close. ‘We’re going to travel. I’m going to take you to see the bamboo forests in Arashiyama. To the pyramids of Giza in Egypt. To the Cliffs of Moher in Ireland and the cherry blossoms in Japan. I’m going to buy us a small cottage with loads of land, right by the coast, where I can teach you to swim and surf.’ I look up at him, loving every word he’s saying and the absoluteness that he says them with. His words are a promise. Ones he will keep no matter what. ‘And we’re going to grow

our very own evergreen tree in the garden, which we'll decorate every Christmas with silver stars and twinkling lights. We'll cook Christmas dinner for all our friends and stay up late singing songs and drinking whiskey. Hell. We can do it every night. A permanent Christmas.' He has such love in his eyes. Such kindness and patience for the girl that, not twenty minutes ago, was trying to cave her head in so she didn't have to see her rapist's face anymore. 'So when your head gets filled with nasty thoughts. When it all gets too loud and too painful in there. When you feel lost and afraid, you think of what we have coming to us. You think of our Christmas tree outside our back door, of lazy Sunday mornings spent making love, and you remember that this...' He gestures around us. 'All this shit... It's temporary. It won't last forever. Not even close. One year. Max.' He rests his hand over my heart. 'This. Us. That's our future. That's forever. That's what will make all this misery worth it.'

We smile at each other in silence as I let those words sink in.



I wake with a start. I always wake with a start. My nightmares are constant, and my reality is hardly any better. After my outburst, I fell asleep in Gabriel's arms on top of the covers. I still haven't agreed to stay for the year, but I promised I would think it over for a day or two. The light breeze from the open window blows the curtain, sending a slight shiver through me. I get up and take a look outside, closing the window as I do. The grounds are still bustling with Nomads, despite the late hour.

Gabriel tosses and turns when he's troubled. And boy, is he troubled tonight. I sit on the edge of the bed watching him roll this way and that way. Mumbling my name. Both his brother's names. His dad. And then *his*. Ryan's. His fist strikes out as he fights in his dreams. He's telling him to stay away. To die. I get to my feet and kneel beside the bed and whisper in his ear.

'Easy. It's all okay. I'm fine. You're fine. I love you.'

And those words settle him. As they always do. I wish they settled me. After I gently kiss his forehead, I pull on the hoodie he tossed on the floor before he fell asleep, and head to the bathroom.

I flick on the light.

And I scream. One of those unhindered, hand to mouth shrieks normal people only ever see in movies. But I'm not normal and I've screamed this scream way too often.

In the shower, dangling a clear three feet off the floor and hanging from a bed sheet twisted into a noose, is a woman. She's still and swaying slightly. Her long red hair covers her face and her arms dangle by her side.

I must be dreaming! I pinch myself... No. I'm awake.

I run in and take her weight. She doesn't move and she's so heavy despite her petite frame. Gabriel comes crashing through the door. He looks at us both, still blinking sleep from his eyes.

'HELP HER!' I holler. 'DON'T JUST STAND THERE! HELP!'

Gabriel takes her from me just as Grayson and the two Nomads stationed outside charge in.

'Shit,' Grayson hisses, rushing over to help Gabriel release the poor woman. They work together to get her down. Grayson undoes the knot as Gabriel holds her up.

I'm panting as I try and take in what the fuck is going on.

Why the hell is there a woman hanging in our bathroom?

She's freed and they lay her gently down on the cold tiled floor. I head over as Gabriel pulls off the noose. But that's not the only thing he pulls off. Her hair comes loose and in one hand he has the noose, in the other, a wig. Grayson rests his fingers on her throat and shakes his head.

'She's dead,' he says breathlessly. He takes a double look at what Gabriel is holding before taking it to see for himself. 'What the hell is that?' He holds it up and looks at me. The wig looks exactly like my hair.

'Oh Christ...' Gabriel says sadly, brushing the black hair from the face of the young woman lying dead between them.

'You know her?' Grayson asks.

‘Yeah,’ he sighs. ‘Her name’s Jade. She’s a Nomad.’ He looks up at Grayson. And then at me. ‘We dated for a couple of weeks a few years back.’

‘She was your girlfriend?’ I ask. ‘Why would she do this?’

But Gabriel shakes his head. ‘There are bruises on her arms and scratch marks on her neck. She put up a fight.’

I swallow, my fingers resting at my own neck. Then notice something scrunched up in her hand. I point it out to them both.

Gabriel opens up her hand and pulls out a crumpled-up envelope. He then looks back to me. ‘It has your name on it.’

‘My name?’

Grayson snatches it from him and tears it open before I can even get close. His eyes take in whatever it says and only then does he hand it to Gabriel. His eyes scan it and they both share a look.

‘Search the grounds,’ Grayson orders. ‘Code-White. I want every inch of this place scoured and the name of every Nomad on duty in my hand within twenty-minutes.’

‘What does it say?’ I ask. ‘What’s a Code-White?’

‘Nothing,’ Gabriel says, stuffing the note into his jogger’s pocket.

‘Gabriel.’ I take a step closer. ‘Tell me.’ I stand in front of him and hold out my hand. ‘No more secrets. Remember?’ But still, he hesitates. ‘Gabriel!’

Begrudgingly, he hands me the envelope. Inside, there is a single piece of paper.

Did you like the flowers? They reminded me of our first date. So I thought I would remind you of it too.

In your heart. In your head.

Forever mine.

See you soon, Red xx

P.S. You really do look beautiful when you're sleeping.

‘Toby did this. He’s the Code-White.’ I drop the letter and sprint out the door. They all call after me as I run. But I won’t be stopped. I’m too filled with fury and the need for vengeance.

‘LILLY!’ Gabriel bellows. ‘WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU GOING?’

‘TO KILL THE MAN WHO MURDERED MY BABY!’ I scream back.

Charging through the kitchen, I swipe up a knife and sprint out the back door into the night. Nomad hands reach out for me, desperate to try and keep me contained. To keep me inside the apparent safety of the house.

Bullshit.

This house isn't safe. Nowhere is safe. Not for me.

And not for him.

I run fast. My bare-feet are cold and damp from the grass as I make my way towards the charred remains of the apple orchard I burnt to the ground several months ago. I grip the knife in my hand, imagining it sliding through Toby's flesh. The thick, red gliding down it's handle and landing on my skin, warm and satisfying. I'll carve him into pieces. I'll skin him alive. I'll cut his lilac eyes from his skull and force them down his throat.

Yes! A little voice calls out from deep inside my subconscious.

I'll make him scream.

Yes!

I'll make him bleed.

Yes! Yes!

I'll make him pay.

YES!

'NO!' Gabriel tackles me to the floor as I scream and curse beneath him. Nomads run past us in droves, all armed and not one of them looks down at me as I thrash and threaten the man I love to let me go. The knife swings wildly between us. His eyes never stop watching it as he tries to get a grip on my wrists. He wraps his fingers around them,

gripping them tight. So tight it hurts.

‘Drop the knife!’

‘GET OFF ME!’

He squeezes harder and I yell out in pain and anger.

‘DROP THE FUCKING KNIFE!’

‘NO!’

His eyes go black. Nomads continue running past us towards the remains of the orchard, all looking for Toby. The sound of their boots thumping the ground and the yelling of orders almost drown us out completely.

‘Drop. The. Knife.’ He snarls through his teeth with demon eyes and fury on his lips. My fingers release their hold on the blade and it lands with a small thump by my head. He gets to his feet and yanks me to mine. I still try and break free of his grip. Wanting nothing more than to run into the surrounding woodland and tear his little brother to pieces. Gabriel doesn’t use his magic on me again. There’s no need. I’m much smaller than him. He slides his arms around my waist, lifts me clear off the ground and starts taking me back inside. I pull and kick and wriggle against his hold. All pointlessly.

‘YOU’RE A DEAD MAN!’ I scream into the night, giving in and letting him carry back to the house. ‘YOU HEAR ME, TOBY? YOU MURDERING BASTARD! YOU’LL PAY! THE DEVIL HIMSELF WON’T KEEP YOU SAFE FROM MY VENGEANCE! YOU MONSTER! Let me down, Gabriel!’ I bark.

As soon as his feet meet the tiles on the kitchen floor, he lets me down. The patio door is closed by Grayson who stands as a barrier between me and the night air.

‘Let me out there.’ I’m shaking from head to toe with such rage I think I could explode.

‘My men will find him if he’s there to be found,’ Grayson replies.

‘Your men couldn’t find shit if it was coming out of their arses,’ I bite back. ‘If they could, we would have had him after the fight at the

Traitor camp.'

'Did you sense him?' he asks accusingly.

'Excuse me?'

'Did you actually sense Toby? Because it's highly unlikely he would dare-'

'He was here!' I snap. 'In this house! In our bedroom.'

'Did you sense him?'

'No. But it had to have been him. Tobias-fucking-Kendryk got into the house. Again!' I look at Grayson accusingly. 'He killed a girl. I told you, Grayson. A hundred times. The fact that we are still in this house is utterly ridiculous. We're sitting ducks. We need to leave!' I'm borderline frantic. He holds up his hand and tells me to settle down. 'Don't you tell me to settle down!' I snap. 'Don't you dare! He was in our bedroom! I know he was! And he left a dead woman as a love letter!'

'*You're* okay, aren't you? *You're* in one piece!' Grayson argues.

'GO SAY THAT TO JADE! THE DEAD GIRL IN MY BATHROOM.'

He twitches and his fists clench. I have frightened, angry tears and sobs desperate to get out. A panic, dread and guilt filling my heart and chest. Whereas the rest of me is coursing with anger, hatred and the need to tear his throat out with my teeth.

'Better Jade dead in your bathroom than you.'

'You're evil. You know that? Pure evil.' As I take a step towards him, Gabriel gets between us. But his focus is on Grayson. Not me.

'You assured me that the house was secured,' he accuses.

'It is,' Grayson snarls. 'We're as safe as we could be. Protected at every border. You have both been digging around in the heads of the Nomads every week as a precaution. No way Toby got in here. If he had, her Sensativa would have exposed him.'

'If Lilly says he was here, he was here. After last time, you swore to

me that you would increase security. Him leaving flowers is one thing. This time, he killed someone. This time, he was in our bedroom-'

'What?' I turn him around. 'Flowers? What flowers?' I look at the note still in my hand. *Did you like the flowers...*

With a groan, he rests his hands on my shoulders and tries to put on a comforting smile. It doesn't work. 'I don't want you to panic. Or get upset. But Bias has been leaving you ... errr ... presents.'

'P-presents?'

'Yeah.' He sighs, his hand moving to my cheek. 'I don't want you to worry-'

'What presents?'

'It's not important.'

'What presents?!'

'Flowers. Chocolates...' His eyes flick over my shoulder to Grayson. 'And...'

'And what?'

'He left a box of dead butterflies for you.'

'Oh my god. A butterfly landed on my shoulder just before we shared our first kiss. I'd never seen one before. He said he fell in love with the wonderment in my eyes. What flowers did he send?'

'Yellow Tansy's and white Clovers. They were dead too. Why? What does it matter what kind?'

'Toby always had a thing about flowers and using them as messages. He would leave me sprigs of white clovers sometimes on my windowsill, letting me know he was close. They mean "*Thinking of you*". But the Tansy's are a declaration of war. And a mix of the two is not good.' I look at them each in turn. 'You should have told me. Is that what you two were talking about by the pool? Is that why you keep having secret conversations? Hiding Toby's gifts from me?'

'I didn't want you to get upset-'

I lower his hand and step back.

‘You lied to me.’

‘I didn’t lie. We just thought-’

‘We?’ I accuse. He glances at Grayson. ‘We.’ I repeat the word and it tastes vile in my mouth. ‘You colluded with Grayson to lie to me?’

‘It wasn’t like that.’ He attempts to explain, but I just shake my head. I don’t know what else to say or do. After everything we promised each other, after everything Grayson has done to us, to me, this is the second time he’s sided with him and kept me out of something I should know about. And now someone has died. In the exact way that I tried to end my own life the day I first met Toby. And Toby used Gabriel’s ex to send his screwed-up message.

‘Come to our room. We can talk about it.’ Gabriel takes my elbow. But I yank it free.

‘I’d rather not. Your ex is lying dead on our bathroom floor.’ I step back. My eyes travel up and down his body. ‘What’s wrong with you? Are you just a compulsive liar? Do you take pleasure in keeping me in the dark?’

‘He couldn’t have got in here. Not without you sensing him,’ Grayson states. ‘It was probably just one of his people.’

‘And that’s supposed to make me feel better? That maybe the person who shot Gabriel and Malcolm did this instead of Toby? This is madness. We need to do the spell now. We need to leave this house. Before he picks you all off one by one so he can get to me.’ But he just shakes his head. ‘How many people need to die until you can admit you’re wrong?’

‘As many as it takes to show you I know what’s best when it comes to keeping *you* alive,’ Grayson says through his teeth. ‘You are not ready to do the spell. And that is final. We are not leaving this house. And that, too, is final. One more word, Miss Hooper, And I will react. Do you understand me? And I know that you would hate for any harm to come to Amara.’

It is only for her that I bite my tongue. One day, I’m sure I’ll bite the damned thing off.

‘Jade’s body has been removed and your bedroom has been secured. I suggest you go and get some rest.’

I quickly turn and leave, heading up the stairs without another word. Because the words I want to say will probably end up getting Amara killed. When I get to my room, I see six Nomads in there nailing the windows shut. They watch me nervously, hammering nails into the sill, adding more locks to my cage. Sure, it’s to keep the monsters out. But also, to keep this particular monster in. When they leave, I kick the door shut and hate that tears start spilling out. Gabriel joins me and closes the door much gentler than I did. I turn and we face each other. Me, furious and upset. Him nervous and clearly desperate to

defend himself.

‘I should have told you,’ he starts. ‘But I knew that you were struggling with everything. Even though you’ve been putting on this brave face. I was just scared that this might tip you over the edge.’

‘You agreed with him and kept me in the dark?’ With a balled-up fist, I strike him in the chest, which considering how I feel, is mighty restrained of me. ‘You swore. Together. No matter what. No more secrets. But you can’t help yourself, can you? You will always fall in line with him. You will always take his side.’

‘That’s not what happened,’ he replies, pointing a finger in my face. ‘I’m making the choices that will keep you safe and sane. Last night, you nearly caved your head in because of a nightmare. I have no idea what you’ll do to yourself if you think Bias can get to you.’

‘He *can* get to me. I’ve been telling you this since we came home from the fight at the Traitor camp. I’ve been screaming it at you all for months but you won’t listen. We shouldn’t be here!’ My foot hammers down on the floor.

‘If we leave this house, we have no protection. At least here, we have some.’

‘Tell that to Jade.’ I gesture to the door. ‘Go tell her how safe it is here. Oh wait, you can’t. BECAUSE SHE’S DEAD! And get your finger out of my face before I bite the damn thing off,’ I snarl. He looks at his out stretched digit and decides to stow it out the way. ‘Toby knows what to say. He knows what will affect me. And it’s not flowers or chocolates, Gabriel. It’s this.’ I gesture between us. ‘It’s you. Tell me, did he leave those little gifts somewhere I was likely to find them? The flowers and chocolates? The box of dead butterflies? Or where you or Grayson would?’ I see him think for a moment and then there it is. *Ding!* ‘But the big present, the one that he made sure I would find, the one that would make me realise he’s been sending things, that one I found. Because he wanted me to. He knew you would hide the others and keep them from me. He wants to make a wedge. Separate us. And because you and Grayson are predictable, he succeeded.’

‘He’s not that clever,’ he insists.

‘He’s smarter than all of you. He’s hands down the smartest person I have ever known. And the most manipulative. Gabriel, I need to trust you. Completely. We agreed, no more secrets. But you hide things from me. You agree with Grayson that I’ll stay, without even asking me. And what’s worse is you take his side over mine.’

‘I’m doing what I need to do to keep you safe. That’s literally all I care about,’ he pleads. ‘Sometimes, Grayson’s choices are the right choices.’

‘If you ever say that to me again, I will never forgive you. I don’t care what he says. If he says the sky’s blue, and I say it’s pink, you

take my side. Because every time you don't, he wins. And I'm telling you now, he won't win. Not me. Not ever. I don't care what I have to do, I'm getting away from him. You all think this house is so safe, it's not.'

'It's the safest place we have.'

'Then I'll tear this place down brick by brick and force us out into the open rather than stay here for a year. Get out, Gabriel.'

'This is my room,' he laughs nervously. But I'm being deadly serious. 'Lilly. Please... I'm on your side. The sky is pink, okay? Totally pink.'

'Get. Out.'

'Baby, I-'

'GET THE FUCK OUT!'

The sun rose a couple of hours ago and I haven't moved. I just lie on my cold empty bed and stare at the slightly ajar door leading to a dark bathroom. Thinking, regrettably, about Toby. About those flowers he would leave me all those years ago and how excited I would be every time I saw them. He noticed a book I was reading one day about flowers. An encyclopedia of sorts. I liked the pictures. I liked reading the descriptions and imagining their smells. Their petals swaying in the breeze. But Toby thought of them as communication. Each flower had a meaning. And he knew them all. So sometimes, when he knew he wouldn't be able to see me for a while, he would leave me some dotted around in places he knew I would visit during the next few days. When I was doing laundry, or stuck in the library, I would sometimes find a single flower on the window ledge. He was talking to me. All the time. Even when he wasn't there. Knowing that someone was thinking of me and missing me made me so happy. I think about how I used to bound towards him when he came to visit. How I loved him. Needed him. Wanted him. He was an obsession. A drug. I'd have chosen him over food or drink. Over air.

How things have changed.

I think now I've become his obsession. I've done something I never did in all those years we were together and it's driving him crazy.

I never said no.

I never complained or resisted.

I gave him everything he ever wanted, even when it hurt. When it broke my heart or my bones. When it made me cry or bleed.

He had all of me. Absolutely every inch. Inside and out.

And I wonder... if he hadn't left me, would he still have all of me? Would I still be his Red?

I never fought with Toby. We never argued. Never disagreed. Because all I wanted was whatever he wanted. Made life easy and

simple. But with Gabriel, we seem to fight all the time. We constantly disagree. I'm nearly always yelling and he's almost always angry with me and frustrated that I call him out on his crap.

It hits me suddenly.

Gabriel is the first person in my entire life that I've ever been comfortable enough and felt safe enough with to feel that I *can* disagree with him. That I *can* argue my side and my opinion. And he lets me. Yeah, he gets angry. But he wouldn't get angry unless he cared. He never argued with anyone else before I came along. Collins told me that, shortly before he was taken away. Grayson wanted to do something? Fine. One of his girls wanted to go somewhere he didn't? He told them to go and not bother coming back.

He just didn't care.

He cares now.

We're both new to this. An equal and loving relationship. It doesn't help that we're trying to figure it all out while being stuck in the middle of a war between witch and human. Father and son. Brother and brother.

The sound of Gabriel's back shuffling against the door interrupts my thoughts. He's been out in the hall since I kicked him out. He keeps attempting to talk to me, but the conversation is very one sided. He shuffles again, muttering about his arse killing him. I roll over and pull up my knees, once more staring intently at the dark gap of the bathroom door.

How did Toby get her in there? Was she already dead? Was she unconscious? If I'd have woken earlier, would she still be alive? Would Toby have strung me up instead?

I grab a pillow and smother my face, desperate to shut out my thoughts. Of course, it doesn't. And now my senses are overwhelmed by Gabriel's scent which makes me ache for him. But no. I have to hold my ground. I'm angry with him and he needs to know that I mean it when I say I will not be lied to. Tossing the pillow to the floor, I sit and pull my hair back into a ponytail. He's still outside, respecting my wish for space. That just makes me want to be back in his arms even more.

Considerate prick.

I move to the window sill and try to prize it open. But the Nomads went to town with the nails and they are well and truly sealed shut.

‘Beautiful?’ Gabriel calls tentatively through the door. He waits for a moment but I don’t respond. ‘I’m going downstairs for some food. Do you want anything?’

Silence.

‘I’ll bring you something up,’ he mutters sadly. ‘I know what you like. I’ll bring you something...’ His words peter out. I hear his head rest against the door. ‘Please don’t hide away from me. I only did what I thought was best. I’m trying so hard to keep you safe and protect you from anything that might hurt you. That’s all. When I come back up, I want to talk. I love you.’ He waits again. ‘Lilly, I love you.’

After a moment, I reply quietly, ‘I love you, too.’

I hear him give a small and relieved little sigh before heading downstairs.

How can I feel even more alone? I hate feeling so betrayed and angry. And at the same time, I know that I would feel so much better if I could just fall into Gabriel’s arms. If he would slide beneath the covers with me right now and entwine himself around me like he usually does. No place is more relaxing than lying on his chest listening to the steady thump thump of his heart. I love how he chuckles softly as I doze while he watches his terrible movies. How my skin tingles as he runs his fingers along my arms.

But he’s the reason for my hurt right now.

Well, him and his brothers.

If only I could find the necklace. I hate the idea of searching through my memories again. Last time was a disaster.

Seeing all that blood.

My body gives an involuntary shudder at the memory of me in that barn surrounded by bodies. But then I remember the reason why I did

that. Why I killed six men so brutally.

They stood by and did nothing as Toby...

Toby.

Fucking Toby.

I bet he has the necklace. I bet Grayson is right and he has it.

Or maybe...

My attention shifts to the door and my feet take me towards it. When I open it up, Ste turns around and rests his hand on his weapon.

‘Everything okay, Miss Hoop-Hey!’

He doesn’t get to finish his question as I barge past him and along the corridor to my right. Running my hand along the bannister, I look down below at the spiraling staircase and see a few Nomad guards walking about below. I pass the dozens of priceless paintings hanging on the wall. Past the Rembrandt, Picasso and the Dali. I turn right again and carry on along the landing. I stride past the Ming vases and the stupid suit of armour, with Ste following close behind the whole way asking what the hell I’m doing.

I finally come to the door at the very end of the hall.

Like both Gabriel’s and Grayson’s bedroom doors, they’re large, heavy double-doors.

I look up at them with a tightness to my chest and struggle to swallow with how dry my mouth has suddenly become.

Toby’s bedroom.

I think of him strolling casually up to these doors and heading inside, whistling as he goes. I watch him pass me with his hands in his pockets, like a ghost. I swear that I can hear his tune echoing around me.

But the doors remain closed and Toby’s image fades.

I reach out and turn the handle. It’s locked.

‘Open the door,’ I order Ste, who scoffs at my request.

‘I don’t have a key. Only Grayson – Hey! What are you doing?’

I’ve turned on my heel and started walking back along the hall. When I reach the suit of armor, I start prizing the five-foot steel pole from its grip. With a big tug, I free it and the suit tumbles to the floor in pieces with one hell of a clang. It’s a heavy weapon. It’s a struggle to hold it. I shuffle my hands up the staff so it’s closer to the great big axe on the end.

Yep. This should do it.

I lift my gaze. All my attention is on the door to Toby’s old bedroom. Ste has his gun raised and is stuttering some kind of warning.

‘Just get out of the way, you idiot,’ I bark, walking past him and his sodding gun. The noise from the falling suit of armour has Hendrix bellowing up the stairs, demanding to know what’s going on. I hear his hurried footsteps coming this way as I carry on with my descent on the door.

I lift the axe. And with all my strength, I bring it down on the lock.

It doesn’t open. But I’ve made a good start on breaking through. When I try to yank it out, the damn thing’s stuck. I rest the sole of my shoe on the door and heave, prizing it free. And with another determined yell, I bring the blade down once more.

The door opens and the lock falls with a thud at my feet.

I drop the axe and look over my shoulder. Hendrix is behind me, watching.

‘Are you going to stop me going in there?’ I ask, wiping the thin layer of sweat from my brow.

‘Ya might find something ya wish ya hadn’t,’ he grunts. ‘Stopping ya would be doing ya a favour.’

‘And since when have you wanted to do me any favours?’ I remind him, making the corners of his mouth twitch into a slight smirk.

He nods over my shoulder. 'Well go on then. Don't say I didn't warn ya.'

He's letting me go in? He's not fetching Grayson or dragging me off?

I turn with a lingering and suspicious look to the vampire. But he remains exactly where he is.

I face the door, take a breath, and head inside.

The room is dark. I feel blindly for a light switch and find one, but no light comes on regardless of how many times I flick it on and off. I step inside, barely able to make out the soft edges of furniture. Ahead are four long, thin windows which reach floor to ceiling. The curtains are drawn, so I head over to open them up. As I walk, the floorboards creak. Dust, which has been settled for years, rises up and tickles my throat. It smells musty in here. Unlived in and neglected.

I pull back all three sets of deep purple curtains, coughing as thick dust explodes from the cloth. The afternoon sunlight streams in. I watch the disturbed dust dance in the beams of light before finding the courage to turn around.

When I do, I know this room belonged to Toby. Even if no one had told me, I would have known.

If I had to use three words to describe it, they would be: gothic, modern and elegant.

The room is huge. Bigger than Gabriel's. The floors are a dark mahogany. The walls, decorated with mottled black wallpaper. Baroque paintings hang on the wall in ornate gold frames. Overhead is a large black wrought iron chandelier with actual candles instead of lightbulbs, and a huge fireplace to the side. There's a great big four-poster bed that twists right up to the ceiling with black chiffon drapes hanging to the floor. His bed is made. The dark grey bedding lays perfectly flat and unwrinkled, scattered with deep red and black cushions. The furniture is all antique and made of dark wood. In the corner is a black piano, and a cast iron freestanding bath sits by the window.

Yep. This just screams Toby.

The wardrobe doors are slightly open. Hanging over the door is a long and thick red woollen scarf. I find myself feeling it. The soft wool fills me with nostalgia. He would wear this in winter. It would wrap around his neck three times at least. Even with that and his thick black jacket, he was always cold to the touch. Opening the doors up, I

see all his clothes. His plain black T-shirts and dark grey jeans. Below, his heavy black boots sit abandoned.

There's a large desk pushed to the window. It's strewn with books. Some open and some bookmarked. Edgar Allan Poe. Oscar Wilde. H.P. Lovecraft. All his favourites. I scour the titles. My mother's book is nowhere to be seen, not that I was expecting it to be.

I look around the room, untouched for years. Probably exactly how he left it.

I smell the air, wondering if I can still detect his scent. But all I smell is stagnant air.

'We searched his room soon after he left,' Gabriel tells me from the door. I glance over and see him standing there watching me with an unreadable stare. His face is expressionless. And when Grayson appears behind him, I certainly expect to be hauled out. But Grayson simply looks around him, taking in the room like he's reacquainting himself with it. He strolls in and runs his finger through the thick layer of dust on the dressing table.

Gabriel keeps his eyes on me and I suspect he's avoiding looking at his brother's bedroom at all costs.

He still calls him Bias. I think that maybe, he still misses the little brother he lost. The one replaced by Toby. The young brown-haired boy I saw in his head looked sweet and kind. I bet that seeing this room hurts.

'What did you find?' I ask. 'When you searched it.'

'Exactly what you see now. Just his personal belongings. Nothing worth anything and nothing significant,' Grayson replies, sliding his hands into his pockets. 'You believe he may have hidden the necklace in here?'

'Perhaps.'

His eyes dance around the room before landing back on me.

'Then help yourself, Miss Hooper. After all, you certainly seemed keen to get in here when you were wielding a priceless seventeenth-century axe against the door. But you won't find-'

He stops talking when I walk with purpose towards a chest of drawers, and he watches with curiosity as I start dragging the chest away from the wall. It's a heavy thing, but I'm very determined. Once moved, I lower myself and start looking for a loose floorboard, which I find quickly enough. I prize it up and drop it beside me before shoving my hand inside. Sure enough, I feel something.

A metal box.

I pull it out and look smugly at Grayson. He walks over and takes it from me, giving it a shake.

'It's locked.' He points out. 'I'll get some cutters.'

'No need.' Gabriel walks over towards the single plant pot with the husk of a dead flower placed on Toby's desk. He starts digging in the dried dirt before producing a single key.

'How did you know that was there?' Grayson asks as Gabriel joins us, cleaning the key off with the hem of his shirt. 'How did you both know?'

'Toby had the same hiding spot in my room back at Harry's. It's where he hid the journal.' And my contraception. But I don't add that part in.

'He learnt his tricks from me. Mother, bless her, was a nosey woman after all. I taught him where to hide a key. I never thought to check behind the chest of drawers for anything though.' Gabriel takes the box and slides the key into the slot. Lifting his head, he looks at me, and then hands me the box. 'It's your necklace. You should open it.'

With a quick look to Grayson – who doesn't object – I take it from him and walk over to the bed. Resting the box on my knee, I wait. I feel like I need a minute. This could be it! My necklace could be hidden in here.

But if it's not... then what sort of things would Toby hide in his most secretive of hiding spots? What horrible, disgusting things would a man like Toby feel the need to hide?

My fingers stroke the edge of the metal box. It's no bigger than five

inches by three. But it's a thick and heavy thing. Built to last. I'm chewing my lip again, and part of me wants to just put the box back and leave.

But only a small part of me.

I turn the key and open it up.

The familiar swell of misery fills my chest when I see what's inside.

I scoop out the pile of photographs hidden inside and start flicking through them. They're of me. Of me and Toby. And they're lovely. We're smiling and kissing. Playing and posing. I remember him taking them on his phone. The first time he pulled it out, I had no idea what it was. I'd never seen a mobile phone before. But then he showed me how it would take pictures.

I look through them all. Me and him in each other's arms. His lips kissing my cheek as I grin from ear to ear. There are some of me with my tongue sticking out and him with his mouth curled up into a hilarious grin. Then there are some he took without me noticing. Me looking up at the sky or reading a book in the grass.

This is Toby and I *together*.

In love.

I take another look in the box which is now completely empty, and replace the pictures before locking it back up.

That's what he hid. Us. Me. The fact that he cared. That's what he hid from the world.

'What's in there, Lilly?' Gabriel asks me.

'The past,' I tell him, putting the box on the bed and getting to my feet. 'A lie. The box is full of lies.'

As I pass, Gabriel takes my arm and stops me.

'Can we please talk?'

'We can talk when my prison sentence is over.' I yank my arm free. 'I'll see you in a year. Unless you can fix it. Then maybe, maybe... We

can talk.' Grayson gives a short laugh as I leave and return to my room.



I watch the sun set through the nailed shut window, daring Toby to come back. Praying that he does. The rage inside me is stronger than ever. I hate it. And I love it. The clarity of such an emotion is peaceful compared to everything else I'm trying to suppress. The pain, fear and grief. The loss of hope.

Give me anger any day.

How dare he hide all those photos. How dare he keep them. How dare he even take them. I hated seeing them. Remembering the bliss and joy and love I felt for him when he took them all. It makes me sick. Especially when I think of how easily he could have taken me from Harry's house and brought me here. He lived in luxury and comfort as I pissed in a bowl in my room and ate scraps, all the while he was taking loving pictures and storing them in his secret box.

I thumb through the pages of my Brothers Grimm book and re-read Cinderella over and over to try and distract myself.

Hendrix comes to hand me some food. He also mentions that Gabriel is talking to Grayson about getting things moving rather than waiting.

An hour or so passes and I remain undisturbed, poking at the drying sandwich.

I keep glancing at the bathroom door. It feels like Jade is in there watching me, still swinging at the end of that rope. The poor woman was murdered by the man I once loved because she was in a relationship with the man I love now.

Still clasping my book to my chest, I walk slowly towards the door and push it open. The light from the bedroom streams in and illuminates the spot where she was hanging. She may be gone, but the sight of her body will never leave me. The sound of her swinging will always be there.

The reason for her death can never be wiped clean.

The bedroom plummets into darkness.

Then, suddenly, a sensation washes over me. Slowly, I turn and look at the closed bedroom door. Nerves grip every one of my cells.

I sense magic.

But it's not Toby. It's not Grayson or Gabriel either.

It's Theo.

With an internal slap to my senses, I pull myself together.

‘THEO’S HERE!’ I scream at the very top of my lungs.

I hear windows smashing throughout the house, all followed by a series of loud bangs and yelling. My own windows shatter and in flies a grenade. It lands at my feet and my eyes widen in horror.

‘Shit!’

I hurl myself over the bed as it goes off. There’s no fire, but the room fills with a bright light and smoke. I can’t see a thing. My ears are ringing and the air becomes so thick it’s hard to breathe. Another bang goes off right beside me. Another stun grenade, and it knocks me for six. I struggle to get to my feet. I can’t get my balance and I can’t hear anything other than a high-pitched ringing noise. I fall to my knees, cover my ears and seal my eyes shut in case another one comes in through the window. As the smoke forces its way into my lungs, my throat starts to burn and I can taste something foul in the air. Coughing and gasping, I grab one of Gabriel’s tops from the floor and cover my mouth.

Oh god, Gabriel! Please let him be okay. I can’t let the last thing said between us be in anger.

I blink open my eyes and see a grenade is still smoking, filling the room with some kind of gas. I run over, grab the thing and toss it back out the window before stumbling to the door, coughing and wheezing with streaming eyes. I still grip my book in my hands. It’s the only sentimental thing I have left and I’ll be damned if I lose it.

My hand doesn’t reach the door knob before it flies open. I come face to face with a tall figure, all in black, with a gas mask covering his face. At his feet is Ste. Dead.

‘Got her.’ The masked man says into a radio. ‘Gabriel’s bedroom. Like you said.’

With blurry eyes, scorched lungs and still struggling to get rid of the high-pitched screeching noise the grenade caused, I back up.

‘Bringing the witch to you now, Theo,’ he says.

Oh shit!

The faceless man lunges at me. When I try to yell out, my breath gets stuck and I can’t stop coughing. I hold Gabriel’s top closer to my mouth and make for the bathroom. I’m quick and manage to slam the door in his face and lock it. But his foot starts hammering against it. He’s joined by another. Two men make light work of breaking through and they soon stand in the darkened doorway looking at me.

The one on the left raises a gun. I toss my book as hard as I can at the raised weapon and I knock his aim so when he fires, a needle-like dart hits the wall behind me.

It’s a tranquilizer. Not a bullet. The same as the Nomads carry. So, they’re not here to kill me.

There’s no way out. The sounds of the house start to become clearer as my ears begin to recover. Yelling. Shooting. Fighting.

Dying.

This is not happening.

I won’t let it happen. I’ve been training for months for precisely this reason.

To fight. To survive.

Focus!

I charge them both, leaping through the middle of the two and when my feet land on the floor, I swiftly kick one in the back of the knee, pick up my book and hurl it into his face, knocking the mask loose. He starts to cough and splutter in the smoke as the second one un-holsters his gun. I pick up the chair at my dressing table and throw it at him. He uses his arms to protect himself. He expects me to run away. But I don’t. I run *at* him, upper-cut his jaw, knee him in the crotch, snatch his gun and point it at him instead.

Wow, my training has really paid off! Thank you, Gabriel!

I pull the trigger. A dart lands in his neck. Whatever's inside works fast. He falls flat on his face, motionless and silent. I'm still coughing and gasping against the remaining gas. My lungs feel like they're full of acid. But I'm focused. Beyond focused. I have a hell of a lot of pent-up anger and frustration inside me and I have people I need to protect from these assholes.

Time to let it out.

The second man – his mask back on his face – points his gun at me. I point mine at him. The rest of the house is still in darkness and chaos. A sea of violence and yelling surround us. I drown it all out. I ignore it all, just as I was taught, and focus on what I must do to get myself safely out of this situation.

I could really do with my magic, I think to myself. But I don't have it. Grayson hasn't given me access. Perhaps he's been hit by a dart?

So, it's just me. All five foot, four inches.

'Surrender and come quietly,' he says through his mask. 'I would hate to have to hurt you. Although, I did love to hear you scream while Theo cut off your fingers. So that's not actually true at all.'

'You'll regret saying that.'

I shoot. He dodges and shoots at me. I spin before planting my feet into the floor and running right at him as fast as I possibly can. He continues to fire. His darts seeking my skin. But I duck and weave and jump and skid. I perform a ballet from one end of the room to the other. Unlike him, I know where every bit of furniture lies, so the darkness doesn't hinder me. I use it all. The desk. The bed. I hide behind it, toss it and leap off it. I crash into him. He falls back, I land and jump to my feet with my gun still in my hand and pointed at his face.

'Surrender,' I tell him.

'Never.'

'Oh. I'm so glad you said that.' Quickly, I pull off his mask. A man in his early thirties looks up at me. I see him raise his weapon. I pull

the trigger first and a dart goes right into his eye.

He screams a high and strangled yell full of pain.

But then, he falls still.

The battle in the house rages on, but it might as well be a hundred miles away. I see a knife in the fallen man's belt. A pistol too. I take them both after sliding on his gas mask.

Do it. They deserve it. Do it!

So I do. I carry out my dark thought, encouraged by the sinister little voice in my head. I hold down the man's right hand and stretch out his fingers. Then, I press the sharpened edge of his blade through them. It's like cutting through a stick. A meaty stick that squirts blood. But seeing them severed, seeing him bleed like I bled... It feels good. Someone rushes into the room. I stand, mask on my face. Knife in my hand. Gun poised. Only to see Hendrix. He looks between me and the man on the floor with a needle in his eye and two fingers severed.

'I err... came to save ya?' he says.

'Great. Hold that thought,' I reply through the mask. I pick up the fingers, toss Hendrix the gun which of course, he catches, and head to the second unconscious man. I kneel next to him, stretch out his right hand, and do exactly the same to him. Hendrix doesn't say a word as I mutilate my unconscious victim, but watches me keenly and looks impressed. I scoop up those fingers as well, and all four go into my pyjama trouser pocket.

'Bit dark,' he says. 'For you.'

'Shady, maybe. But this isn't dark. Nowhere close. It's payback.'

I stand and see a second wave of attackers coming towards us from the top of the stairs.

'Hendrix, behind you!' I point over his shoulder. Three men attempt to tackle the vampire. He makes light work of taking them down but the smoke around us is building and getting thicker. The grenades are going off all over the house. When he snaps the neck of the third man, he slides off his mask and places it over his own face.

‘What’s happening down there?’

‘The house is overrun,’ he tells me. ‘Everyone is getting out. You know the drill. We need to regroup in the woods and launch a counter attack. Everyone has headed to the safe point.’

‘Where’s Gabriel-’

‘Out. They’re all out. Grayson dragged lover-boy into the woods and sent me to come get you. You know what happens if any of the others die. They all die. Can’t let that happen. They had to get out.’

‘Connor?’

‘I just told ya, Little Witch. They’re out. Let’s get ya outta here too, hmm?’ he says, holding out his hand. He seems remarkably calm, considering. But then... so am I. I walk to the door, scooping up my Brothers Grimm book as I go, and push his hand out of my way.

‘I don’t need my hand holding, thanks.’

‘You and that stupid book,’ he tuts.

‘It’s the only thing I own that I care about so shut up.’

The top landing is quiet. But below is far from it. We stand at the top of the stairs and look down at the fighting men and women. Guns. Stun grenades. Knives. Fists. At the base of the stairs is a solid line of coughing and wheezing Nomads, each one determined not to let anyone else past.

‘I need my magic,’ I tell Hendrix, giving him a whack on the arm. ‘Where are Grayson and my Bloodstone?’

‘Out,’ he grunts through the black mask. ‘I told ya.’

‘He needs to give me my magic!’

He looks below and growls. ‘I got my orders.’

‘Which are?’

‘Get you out. Come on.’ He grabs my arm and pulls me down stairs. Straight into the fight. The Nomads see us and let us through. But the

traitors see us too and if all hell hadn't already broken loose, it sure has now. It's like a starving horde and I'm a great big steak. It's sheer desperation and panic as they try and fight through the Nomads to get anywhere close to me.

'Ya need to colour ya hair. It's a glowing sign telling everyone who ya bloody are. C'mon.' He has a tight hold on me and pulls me through to the next flight of stairs. But I stop dead when I see who is coming up them. Even with the gas masks on, I know exactly who it is.

'Hendrix! It's Theo! He's there! He's right there!' My instinct takes over. After months of fantasising about all the terrible things I would do to him, I can't stop myself from charging.

Hendrix hurls me to the side as a streak of lightning comes straight for us before I get anywhere close. He takes a blast to the chest instead of me and flies backwards into the wall as I land on the floor face down.

Goddamn it. I need my magic!

Hendrix gets to his feet, runs to me and yanks me up. He then starts pulling me away.

'NO!' I scream, desperate to get free of his grip. 'We need to attack!'

'This is a fight we ain't gonna win,' he tells me. 'We're too outnumbered and our enemies are armed to the teeth. And now Theo's here. I can't take him and neither can you.'

As more lightning streaks from Theo's hands, we sprint to the library and seal the doors shut behind us. It seems that this is the only room not under attack. The air is clear and it's empty. I pull off my mask, as does Hendrix.

'Call Grayson. Tell him to give me my fucking magic!'

'I can't,' he growls, pushing over a shelving unit so it lands across the door, before gripping my wrist and pulling me deeper into the library.

'You can't? You don't have a phone?'

‘I have a phone, Little Witch. But Grayson doesn’t currently have your Bloodstone.’

‘What! Where is it then? He can’t give me access unless he holds it. Has he lost it?’

‘No,’ he says, going to a window and attempting to open it. But there’s no latch. I know. I checked many months ago. ‘I have it,’ he says. The sound of the Traitors on the other side of the door, battering it down, echo around the empty room.

‘You have it?’ I smack his arm. ‘Give it to me!’ I hold out my hand expectantly, but he laughs a low cruel laugh and shakes his head. ‘Why the hell not?’

The banging gets more violent. The door starts to edge the case further and further away.

‘I have strict orders. You ain’t to touch the stone. Under any circumstances.’

‘Even if we could both die?!’

He gives up with the sealed window and looks at me. ‘Afraid so.’ He shrugs. ‘Grayson will see ya dead before he sees ya free with your magic to wreak your revenge on him. Ya get hold of this stone? We’ll never see ya again.’ My eyes go to his neck. That makes his smile grow even more. ‘I would really love to see ya try and take it. I will break every bone in your goddamn body before ya get close and Grayson will skin those friends of yours alive. Mark my words. And it ain’t round my neck.’ He points to his crotch. ‘I put it somewhere *real* special.’

‘Oh... fuck you Hendrix.’

‘Not right now, Little Witch,’ he laughs. ‘Maybe another time?’ I look around the room and make a bee-line for the stairs that lead up to the gallery. ‘Where ya goin’?’ he calls, chasing after me.

‘To make sure the journal isn’t in here and to destroy Connors notes.’

‘It ain’t in here. Grayson has the journal,’ he tells me, grabbing my wrist as we reach the top and yanking me back so I tumble into his

arms. 'We need to get out of here. Now!'

'Connor has a desk full of notes. If Theo gets anything that leads him to the spell to kill all the Nomads, we're all screwed.' Reluctantly he agrees, knowing that I'm right. We run to Connors little corner and start scooping up as much paper as possible. All the while, the door edges more and more open. But there's too much to hold. The more we pick up, the more we drop.

'We burn it all,' I suggest. 'Do you have a lighter?'

Hendrix shakes his head. 'It will burn the house down with all these dry books. We'll take what we can and hope it's enough. We can't lose the house. We'll have nowhere to keep ya safe if we do.'

I look over his shoulder to the door and the sound of dozens of men furiously trying to knock them down, and then back to him with raised eyebrows. 'Oh yeah, Hendrix. I'm real fucking safe. I mean, if the dead woman in my bathroom didn't drive home the safety of this place, the fucking army trying to kick down the door certainly does!'

'You're a seriously sarcastic little thing. I see why he likes ya,' he chuckles. 'We won't burn down Grayson's house. Once we kill the Traitors, the house will be secured again.' He picks up a chair and tosses it through the window. The glass shatters and the cool night air pours in. 'I'll get ya out and somewhere safe, and then the rest of us will come back and re-take the house. Ready?' he asks.

'Are you joking?' I point to the window. 'I'm not a vampire. I don't have the immortality spell. And that's a forty-foot sodding drop at *LEAST!*' He simply shrugs. 'I'll break my fucking neck.'

'And Theo wants to tear ya limb from limb. Very slowly. And then force ya to do his spell which will kill your entire species. Except for his Traitors of course. Unless ya have an alternative, we're jumping. Just... hold onto me and I'll take the majority of the fall.' He beckons me towards him. The shelves scrape further across the floor. 'Time is kind of a factor here, Little Witch. They're coming for ya.'

'Goddamn it.' I stand by his side, both of us at the window. In the distance, I see two men in the trees arguing. One is trying to get away from the other. It's Gabriel and Grayson. And Grayson is really struggling to keep his brother from coming back to the house. Gabriel looks frantic. His arms are waving in the air. He's throwing punches.

But Grayson won't let him leave. None of them will. Nomads are surrounding him, trying to calm him from his frantic efforts. But he's using his magic and ordering them away.

'Aww. Lover-boy's all upset you got left behind.'

'Shut up,' I hiss.

'When we land, bend your knees,' Hendrix says, pulling me into his enormous frame and holding me tight. His face is far too close for comfort. 'This kind of reminds me of the night we met. You in your little pj's. Me nice and close.'

'You try and bite me again, I'll bite you back.'

'Yep. I definitely see why he likes ya. Ready?'

The doors fly off their hinges and Theo and his army storm in below us. We're about to jump when he says something that makes us both stop.

'I have your friend!' Theo calls out. 'You leave, he dies.'

We can't see over the balcony, but we hear who he has.

'Lilly... RUN!' Connor yells, before someone punches him. The thud and the groan it produces makes me feel sick.

'You said he got out!'

'I lied. Well,' Hendrix scoffs quietly. 'That's a bit of bad luck for the leprechaun. We're out of here.'

No chance.

'Get the Bloodstone to Grayson. And tell Gabriel I love him,' I whisper in his ear, before shoving him hard out the window. The look of utter shock on his face is almost worth it as he reaches out. But he catches nothing but air. I watch him fall and like a cat, he lands on his feet and simply looks up at me with his arms wide.

'The fuck did ya do that for?' he yells angrily up at me.

'What? You landed on your feet, didn't you?'

‘You didn’t know I would.’

I point to the two brothers. ‘Go!’ I mouth. ‘Now!’

‘Stupid bloody woman.’ He turns and sprints into the darkness towards Gabriel and Grayson.

I turn to face Theodore Kendryk.

‘LILLY HOOPER?’ Theo taunts. ‘Get yourself out here. Or your friend dies.’

I watch the vampire sprint away into the darkness. He’s followed swiftly by the remaining Nomads, many of who are limping. But the traitors are giving chase. The attack was so sudden. So quick. We didn’t stand a chance. But like Hendrix said, we’ve planned for this. They’ll meet in the woods, regroup and re-take the house. I know there are no witches inside except Theo and me. And by the stream of bodies currently fleeing, I’m pretty certain the Nomads are getting the hell out of dodge too. But Theo wants me alive, so if I can make it until I get my magic, everything should be okay.

‘I know you’re branded,’ Theo laughs. ‘Just come out here like a good girl. No need to embarrass yourself and try to be brave.’

Good girl?

Prick. Let’s go show him.

I turn, and head to the balcony. I grip the railing and look down.

Ahh, Fuck...

I’m so outnumbered. The whole library is full of Traitors. Thirty at least. And all of them are pointing their tranquilizer guns at me. They’ve removed their masks. No need for them in here. It’s pretty clear of smoke. I see the hatred they have for me clear on each of their faces. Well, I did murder a fair amount of them last time we faced each other so I shouldn’t be too surprised.

Front and center is Theo. On his knees with a bloody nose and a pistol to his temple, is Connor. The whole scene stokes the fire of rage in my chest that has been there for the last few months. I should be afraid. But I’m not.

I’m vengeful.

Damn right you're vengeful.

'C'mon.' Theo smirks. 'Come down nicely. And I'll let him go.'

Doubtful.

'You alright, Connor?' I ask.

'Fine,' he replies, looking at Theo. 'Prick punches like a little bitch.'

Theo thrusts his fist into Connors face, forcing him to fall to his side, spitting blood. He watches me closely for a reaction. So, I give him one. I slide my hand into my pyjama trouser pocket, and one by one, I drop the severed fingers of his men to the floor. He watches them land by his feet with a series of small little thuds, and then lifts his equally hate-filled face to mine.

'The rest of your men are upstairs. Alive. They're lucky I only took their fingers and not their lives. Oh. I may have partially blinded one though.'

'You keep making mistake after mistake, *little girl*.'

'And so do you, *old man*,' I reply. 'How's the hand?' I ask, looking at his right hand which is covered in a black leather glove. The corner of his mouth twitches the same way Grayson's does when he's angry. The fingers of the hand I burned barely twitch. 'Does it still work?' I ask, holding up my own. 'I mean, losing two fingers has been tricky. But I can still use it perfectly well. Check it out.' I hide my thumb and forefinger, and leave up my middle one. Connor laughs as I grin. I just need to keep him talking long enough for Hendrix to get to Grayson.

'My son branded you, I hear.'

'Yep.' I nod. 'He sure did. How did you know that?'

'I have my ways.'

'I have to hand it to you. You really suck at raising kids.'

'And yet, you're dating one of them.'

'He's the exception to your brood of psychopaths.'

Theo scoffs and mutters the word “*Exception*”. I scan the crowd of Traitors searching for a face. But I don’t see him.

‘Where’s Jensen?’ I ask.

‘Not here,’ he replies, briefly looking to the ground and then back to me, keen to keep his composure.

‘I’m right, aren’t I?’

‘I have no idea in what respect you think you are right but I’m sure that whatever it is, you’re not.’

‘I’ll find out you know.’ I lean over the bannister. ‘And I want you to tell him that if I’m right about who he is, I still won’t spare him.’

He holds out his hand and I’m yanked over the barrier by his magic. Connor yells my name as I fall. I land in a painful heap at Theo’s feet. I groan and roll over... laughing.

‘You’re always laughing,’ he says, clearly frustrated. ‘No matter how much I hurt you, you laugh. What’s wrong with you? Are you insane?’

‘A little bit. I think so, yeah,’ I chuckle, holding my elbow which hurts like hell after taking the impact. He stands over me, sneering. I just look up at him with my best smile. ‘Humpty dumpty sat on the wall...’ I sing.

‘Shut up.’

‘Humpty dumpty had a great fall-’

He hits me with his lightning. The green energy shoots over me as I scream and writhe on the floor. Connor’s up and trying to get to me, but the Traitor with the gun holds him back. Theo doesn’t stop. He doesn’t ease up.

‘You think it funny? Mocking me about the mass murder you carried out on my people?’

I can’t reply. All I can do is scream. The whole room illuminates with the light from his Energy magic.

Hurry up Hendrix!

He stops and crouches down by my head.

‘Where is the journal, Lilly?’

‘Up your arse,’ I laugh painfully.

‘Do you remember what happened last time I asked you where that damned thing was and you refused to answer?’ He grabs my three-fingered hand and waves it in my face. ‘I am trying to save the world, Lilly! If the Nomads get their magic back, there will be worldwide war! Is that what you want? For everyone to die? At least with my plan, only the ones who want their magic back will perish. Only the ones that want a war will die! I can save you! Agree to help me save the world, and I will save you too!’

‘I will never help you kill thousands of people. Never!’

In the distance, I hear yelling. Theo hears it too. He looks up at the balcony.

‘Gabriel is out there,’ he tells me. ‘He heard you screaming.’ He encircles his hand around my throat and lifts me to my feet. Sneering, he leans into my face and squeezes as I try to bat his hand away. ‘He saw the light of my torture. Shall we let him see a little more?’ I’m dragged up the metal staircase and hauled to the broken window. Below us is a real sight. The gathered Nomads who met at the rendezvous have regrouped and launched their attack. The grounds are a battle zone. Nomads and Traitors are fighting with everything they have. Grayson’s lightning streaks through the air. Gabriel is half way through slitting a man’s throat. Hendrix is at the opposite side of the fight to Grayson and they’re both trying to reach each other. Gabriel glances up and sees me. Theo leans into my ear.

‘Let’s give Gabriel something to watch. Shall we?’

He pins my arms across my chest and holds me so my back is against him. His arms light up and I’m smothered by his lightning once more. My head is thrown back as my body starts to spasm. Every nerve is screaming in agony. My flesh feels like it’s on fire. My bones are on the verge of splintering as the volts surge through me. My teeth are clenched and every muscle is rigid.

‘I’m taking you and the Quinn boy,’ Theo says with a forced calm in my ear, not stopping. ‘You... and the journal. And you will read me my spell. Together, we will destroy every last witch, except my chosen few. So just tell me where the journal is now, and save yourself some pain.’ He makes it stronger.

I just scream. It’s all I can manage. He squeezes me harder, grinding my ribs together and angering the bruises from training.

Hendrix is swamped by Traitors. He disappears under a wave of bodies. Theo reaches out and wraps his fingers around the wrist of my right hand and lifts it to his face. My fingers are stretching out, contorted by the voltage tearing through every inch of me.

‘You destroyed my hand you know. When you burnt it at the Traitor camp. I can barely move my fingers. So, I’m going to bite every one of yours off and leave them here for Gabriel to find.’ He opens his mouth, puts my middle finger in and clamps his teeth down. Below, Hendrix is still fighting the horde that continue to bundle on top of him. For each one he tosses off, another takes their place.

Theo’s teeth pierce my skin.

Gabriel leaps on top of the pile of men. He raises a knife and plunges it down. Then he does it again. And again. Each time he raises it, it drips with more blood and there’s less of a barrier between him and Hendrix. Gabriel’s bellowing orders at the Traitors. He’s ordering them to open fire on their own men, and they have no choice but to obey.

Blood starts to seep down my wrist.

A hand rises from the pile. Gabriel snatches something from it, turns, and scans the crowd for Grayson. He spots him, still trying to fight his way through the countless Traitors.

‘GRAYSON!’ Gabriel bellows, raising his hand. I feel Theo’s teeth stop. His lightning doesn’t. Grayson throws up his waiting hand. Gabriel pulls back his own, and tosses the dark red stone high into the air.

‘What is that?’ Theo asks. I watch it fly. The chain spins slowly behind it as it soars over the unsuspecting heads of fifty or so Traitors and thirty odd Nomads. A few of the enemy see it and try to intercept.

But they're foiled by the Nomads who hurl themselves on top of them.

'WHAT IS THAT?!' Theo demands.

Grayson leaps up into the air, his arm extended as high as it will go.

And he catches it.

He bloody catches it.

And as soon as he does, I feel my magic return and swirl inside me like a most welcome friend. The other half of me returns and makes me whole once more. Gabriel and Grayson both turn and look up at me expectantly, waiting to see a show.

I see Gabriel's mouth move. 'Come on, baby,' he says. 'Come on.'

'WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?' Theo barks once more, increasing his torture beyond pain. Beyond agony. He's not holding back. Not one bit. I have my magic. But this is my chance.

Pain.

One of the triggers that may manifest my magic. Like I said, I'll do whatever it takes to get out of here. I need to manifest. So I let him do it, knowing that he won't stop in order to spare me permanent damage. I let him send that power through my arms. Down my back. Along my shoulders. It's more than I can bear. I'm on the verge of passing out. Of giving in.

And then, all that pain, it becomes something else. Power. Strength. His lightning is no longer attacking me.

It's become mine.

I start to laugh. A low, certain and victorious laugh, because I feel it. Opening up inside me. The surge is no longer invading me. I'm creating it. Grayson was right. Pain is a good motivator.

I laugh harder. And the certainty that was in Theo begins to fade. He releases me. His lightning stops coming from him. But still, it remains on my skin, covering me entirely. Crawling over my chest. Lacing around my arms. Snaking up my neck, and all the while... I

laugh. Theo steps back. I reclaim control over my limbs. My muscles are no longer a slave to convulsions. I take the pain he inflicted on me, I take his lightning, and I make it my own. It turns a deep and vivid red. It shines ten times brighter than his or Grayson's ever has.

The heavens rumble. Behind the clouds, the sky streaks with bolts of red. Everyone falls silent. All eyes go up. The rumbles grow louder. They shake the earth. The light beyond the clouds flashes brighter. More and more it builds and the low grumbling starts to crackle. Like Grayson's and Theo's magic, but a hundred times louder and miles above us. They raise their hands to shield their eyes as the bursts of light get brighter. And brighter. And then a huge, thick bolt shoots down from the sky... straight into my heart. All that power. All that energy. All that magic, hits me. I let it in. I let it fill me. It's euphoric. No pain. None whatsoever. Every cell in my body becomes alive. Heightened. And with a mighty howl of laughter, I open my arms out wide.

And I let it all out.

The darkness illuminates as I send streaks of lightning out into the mass of bodies below. And every single Traitor gets a chest full of raw, undiluted Energy magic. It swerves around the Nomads and doesn't touch a single one. Because I don't want it to. I also don't want anyone else to die. Not that I'm particularly fond of the Traitors, but I still feel sick every time I think of what happened with my fire last time I faced them. Connor yells and I know he's in trouble. Probably about to be used as a ransom at the end of a gun or the sharpened edge of a blade. With the slightest twitch of my hand, he rises in the air and flies past me at speed, only to land by Gabriel with ease and grace. I can't tell what emotion is going through Gabriel's mind. Fear. Pride. Horror. Perhaps all three as he looks between me and the red lightning shooting all around him. Grayson's expression I can see. It's shock. Complete and utter surprise at the immensity of what I am doing.

'DON'T JUST STAND THERE!' Gabriel orders, his senses returning long before anyone else's. 'FIGHT! TAKE BACK THE HOUSE!' He resumes his attack, as do the others. I stop my own, letting the Traitors fall to the floor in an exhausted, post-torturous heap. I turn, my body still glimmering red, and I face Theo instead.

'I'm sorry. I interrupted you. Where were we?' I scratch my head. 'Oh yes. You were about to bite off my fingers and kidnap me. Please. Continue.' I give a small scoff. 'Or try. Could do with a laugh.'

‘Grayson, he made a Bloodstone? That’s what he threw?’

‘Seems your intel isn’t as thorough as you thought. Tell your men to withdraw. Or I will kill them-’

He shoots his lightning at me before I can finish, and I retaliate. Our two colors clash together and splinters off in all directions around us. It hits the wooden bookcases and sends chunks of wood splintering around us. The room fills with sharp pellets and the Traitors arms cover their heads to protect their eyes from the fragments darting around them.

‘FIRE! PUT HER DOWN. NOW!’

The Traitors raise their weapons and point them straight at me. There must be twenty sedative darts ready to fly. I raise my second hand and send my lightning to them too. The whole room is now so bright it’s almost blinding, and they have no control over their limbs as they convulse, still on their feet.

I like this power.

I raise my hand. They rise too. Their feet hover a few inches from the ground and I stare at Theo.

‘I really don’t want to kill-’

Theo assaults me with a wave of telekinetic power, breaking our electrified stream. I shoot backwards, high into the air. My back hits the wall above the broken window and I fall flat on my face with a heavy thud. Theo pulls out a walkie-talkie from his pocket.

‘I DON’T CARE WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO. GET THAT BLOODSTONE FROM GRAYSON!’ He scoops up one of the guns left by his foot and walks quickly towards me. I push myself up to my feet and see his furious anger etched on his features.

He wants to kill me. He really does.

But, he needs me alive.

I have that in my favour at least.

He charges towards me, lightning streaking up his arms. Gun cocked and a hateful sneer on his face. I'm up. And he fires. My hand flies up and I think, *stop*.

And it does.

The dart stops mid-air, a couple feet away from me. His men have regathered their senses and also their weapons. They too, fire. I'm amazed at how little effort I find it all. Soon, I have a dozen darts hovering in the air. All with their needles pointed right at me. I may not be in full control over my emotional state these days, but my magic certainly seems to be under my control.

With my finger, I turn them around. And with a smug smile, I send them straight back. The darts bury into their skin and they slump still and silent on the floor. Theo managed to deflect his with a wave of his hand.

I feel the corner of my mouth twitch as a wicked plan, pops into my head.

The house has been compromised. But I could take it back. I could knock them all out. I could hurl them out the window. Hell, I could kill them. But I'm not going to do any of those things. Because this house is my prison. And we all know what I did to the last prison I was locked up in. They think this place is safe. As long as it stands, they'll put off doing the spell.

You know what needs to be done.

I hear that voice. The voice that's been talking to me in the back of my mind for months, and tonight it's a little louder than it has been before. Telling me to cut off the fingers of the sleeping Traitors. To show them to Theo. And now...

Theo has reloaded his gun and I watch him, amused that he thinks I can be beaten by a sedative.

'You shoot that at me, I'll send it back,' I say simply. 'And I won't miss.' His finger hovers over the trigger and he struggles hard not to fire. He knows I'll do it. He knows. 'I would like nothing more than to kill you, *Theodore Kendryk*. But. You die, my future dies too. And I will not lose Gabriel again. Not because of you.' I take a step towards him, my lightning sparking from my skin to the ground in small but fierce

bursts, scorching the wooden floors it contacts. 'Not because of Grayson.' My fire comes to life on my hands. The red flames burn deep and ferocious and mix with the bright lightning. I take another step closer. 'Not because of Toby.' He stumbles back as my flames creep up my arms and the streaks of energy reach up to the ceiling. I use my Telekinesis to break the banister at the edge of the balcony and send it soaring clear across the room, blasting into the wall behind him and taking chunks of brick with it. He flinches. His men watch me nervously as they scoop up their unconscious comrades. My toes rest on the very edge of the gallery as I look down at him. My fire covers my chest. The lightning sparks out all around me. His men stumble and leap out of its way. 'I will win my freedom. I will destroy my enemies. I will have my happy ever after. And God help anyone who gets in my fucking way.' The book cases ignite. Every single one of them. My Energy magic breaks the wood and splinters them into pieces. The floors shake. The ceiling starts to crumble. I look down at Theo who watches in shock at the power I am wielding. And this isn't even half of what I feel I can do. I reach out and use my magic to hurl him through the window, just as I did with Connor. He can't be here for this. I simply can't risk his death. So I hand him to his children. They can deal with him as I deal with my problem.

This fucking house.

I know what I must do. I will not stay under Grayson's thumb for a year. I will not sit here and wait for my enemies to come and take what's mine.

I may be tied to Grayson by his threats and by the Bloodstone. But I will not be tied to this house and forced to stay here.

'Run,' I tell the Traitors. They stagger back, terrified. 'I – said - run.' My fire covers me entirely and the flames around them double in size.

I wait, and watch them leave.

Burn this hell-hole to the ground.

'Yes, mam,' I reply to my little voice.

My head goes back and my arms stretch out as I let my magic consume me entirely. The flames. The lightning. The Telekinesis. The power of it all. It's strength and ferocity. It's courage. Belonging. Completion. It's the biggest and best release of power I have ever

experienced. A weight off my chest. And the void that has plagued me since the day I was born, becomes less as I accept yet another realm of power.

Stay here for another year? No chance. Not in hell.

My laughter is a song. And it's accompanied perfectly with the melody of burning wood and fracturing walls. Crumbling ceilings and splintering floors. The tapestry with the seven-pointed star disappears in smoke and fire. Connor's corner crashes through the floor.

And then I explode in a glorious eruption of fire and light and magic.

And I send this wretched house straight to hell.

Where it belongs.

The silence in the car is deafening. The tension, palatable. Do I care?

No.

I don't. I'm precisely where I want to be. Going precisely where I want to go. With precisely who I want to be with.

My head is on Gabriel's lap as we drive away from the smoldering wreck that was once The Orchard. We're leaving it behind for good. I've left a crater in the ground in its place, and in the distance, we can still see the smoke in the sky. We had no time at all to even attempt to put it out. Not that there was anything left to put out. I'd seen to that. Helicopters and sirens descended on us within minutes. We had to run. My fire is a vibrant red. I couldn't change it once it was made. We leaped into various cars and fled into the night.

Gabriel's hand runs through my ash filled hair as I lay across the back seat of Grayson's Mercedes. I'm utterly exhausted and my muscles ache from Theo's torture. Up front, Hendrix is driving. Grayson's in the passenger seat with his elbow resting on the door and his attention far from here. He watches the sunrise, deep in thought and occasionally peers up into the sky to see if we're being followed by any of the helicopters, but we're not. He then uses the rear-view mirror to look at me cradled in his brothers loving arms. There's something ticking over in his dark mind. I can tell in the way he looks at me. I roll over and bury my face into Gabriel's stomach. I lay still. Tired. Aching. But immensely satisfied. Connor and Billy are in the car behind and all around us in various vehicles are the Nomad survivors. And a couple of Traitor prisoners, too.

No Theo though.

Everyone was thrown backwards through the air by the sheer intensity of my explosion. He got out of there and left his men behind while everyone was distracted. He was terrified, Gabriel said. He took one look at what I was doing and fled.

I, on the other hand, strolled out of that inferno like a demon leaving hell. And the look of horror on Grayson's face as he took in the sight of his precious mansion smothered in my fire was a little slice of heaven.

He cut me off from my magic and threatened to kill me. To kill Amara. To tear us all apart for what I'd done. I'd never seen him so unhinged and unrestrained. It wasn't my fault, I told him. I lost control. I couldn't help it. My fire... it was just too strong. I warned him. I told him that the house wasn't safe. That we were at risk. And look what happened. Theo tortured me. Not my fault. I did what I had to do to survive. He grabbed Billy's gun and pointed it straight at my head, and for a second, I really thought he was going to pull the trigger. Gabriel stood between us and surprisingly, so did Hendrix. But it was the distant wailing of sirens that snapped him out of his rage. The fire reflected in his eyes and ash fell slowly from the sky like flakes of filthy snow. Then we turned and ran.

I think I'm getting better at lying.

After a while, Gabriel slides his fingers along my arm and leans down to kiss my temple. I look up at him, all blue-eyed and devoted. But a little sadness lingers there. Disappointment too, I think.

'She okay?' Grayson asks.

'You mean after you almost shot her in the face?'

'I was angry. I would never have pulled the trigger.'

'She's asleep,' Gabriel lies, looking me straight in the eye. 'She's completely spent.'

'She did that on purpose,' Grayson says darkly. 'She destroyed our home intentionally.'

'She did no such thing,' Gabriel replies, as if that's the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard. 'She saved us tonight. Theo came at us with an army and if she hadn't have been there, we'd be the only ones left. In chains at his camp having *our* fingers chopped off.'

'What? Instead of on the run with the authorities descending on what's left of my house which was clearly destroyed by otherworldly forces?' There's a long silence and I watch Gabriel locked in a stare

with his brother. 'For centuries, we've managed to stay hidden. She's been out of her uncle's' cellar for less than six months, and she's more than likely just exposed us all. That power is too much for her. She's not emotionally stable enough to think clearly in regard to using it,' Grayson says.

'She didn't mean to destroy the house like that. It was an accident. Remember when she had a nightmare and set fire to her room?'

'She didn't lose control this time. I know it. She destroyed that place with precision and malice.'

'That's not true.'

I hear Grayson turn in his leather seat. 'You heard her laughing,' he says quietly. 'I know you did because I heard it too. That laugh, echoing out from the blaze. The same one we heard when she killed the Traitors at the camp. Just as her hair started turning. And we heard it again tonight.'

Gabriel shuffles forwards a little, anger piercing not only his tone but his entire body. 'The Nomads would probably all be dead if it wasn't for her. She was tortured mercilessly by our father tonight. So much so, she manifested a new realm of power. And you know the first thing she did? She saved us. All of us. Before getting herself to safety or defending herself, she sent that lightning down to the Traitors to save us. And your way of thanking her, was to threaten her best friend and attempt to blow her head off. Have you any idea the pain she must have had to endure for it to bring about a manifestation? I'm only glad that it wasn't you that got to hurt her in order to make that manifestation happen.'

'Don't get me started on that manifestation,' he hisses. 'That was something else entirely. She conjured lightning from the sky, Gabriel! From the sky! She didn't just create it. She summoned it.'

'She's the Arcane, Grayson. She's not like the rest of us. She has unlimited access to every aspect of magic. Once manifested, she can use it all. Maybe you should remember that next time you threaten her or the people she loves.'

'She turns on me, I'll destroy you all. I promise you-'

'Yeah yeah. I know,' Gabriel murmurs tiredly. Well, we have heard

it a hundred times before. ‘We haven’t seen an Arcane since Rebecca. And I’m sure you remember what she was capable of. Lilly’s the same. She is the most powerful person alive. We have no idea the full potential of an Arcane. Rebecca wasn’t exactly a sharer, was she?’

‘Lilly is a *Broken* Arcane.’

‘I’m fully aware.’

‘Her personality is in two,’ Grayson insists, and I know he’s looking at me. ‘I know that of all the things you fear, her giving into the Break frightens you most of all. We lived with a Broken brother for centuries. When Tobias disappeared, we all slept a little easier knowing he wasn’t under our roof any longer. Imagine a Broken Arcane! I’m telling you, Lilly cannot control what she can create. And the more power she gains, the bigger risk we are all in if she turns. We can’t trust her.’

‘Speak for yourself.’ Gabriel sits back and looks down at me. ‘I trust her completely. I know she is strong enough to not give in to her Break. She’s the strongest person I have ever known.’ God, I absolutely adore him. ‘But saying that, she loves me. Even if she did Break, she wouldn’t hurt me. You...’ He tuts, shaking his head. ‘Well, you she hates. And she has every reason to. As do I, *Brother*. Maybe if you backed off, gave her back her freedom and showed her some respect, she wouldn’t be such a risk to you. Because one day, she will get her magic back from you. And you better hope she’s merciful. I sure as hell wouldn’t be.’

Gabriel is locked in a stare with him. Unblinking. Unfazed. Strong and confident.

‘You know as well as I do,’ Grayson says darkly. ‘She is capable of real cruelty when she believes it’s justified. Broken or not. That nasty streak Toby put there, coupled with all that magic and her Broken side clawing to get out? It’s a disaster waiting to happen.’

‘Any cruelty she hands to you is well deserved.’

‘And when you do something she deems as a betrayal, what then? She said she wasn’t staying in the house for a year. The next day she reduces our home to rubble. All our possessions. Priceless pieces of art.’

‘It’s just stuff, Grayson. Everything I care about is in my arms.’ He tightens his hold on me.

‘What about our mother’s stuff? Hmm? Her jewelry. Her clothes. Her library. It’s all gone. It’s never coming back. Our last link to the woman who raised us. Loved us. Your girlfriend turned it all to ash because she’s in a rush to kill herself and do a spell she simply isn’t ready to do. And now look where we are. Homeless. Out in the open. Defenseless. How can we finish translating the journal now? Our books are in the wind. Literally. It’s a good job I had the journal and what we have translated so far, on my person tonight.’

I see a flicker of doubt in Gabriel’s eyes. And I feel a swell of guilt and regret in my chest.

‘She didn’t do it intentionally,’ he concludes, less absolute than he was a moment ago. ‘She wouldn’t put everyone at risk like this. She wouldn’t-’

‘That girl is dark and dangerous,’ Grayson tells him. ‘One wrong word. One misguided touch. And she will turn on you.’

‘You have no idea who she is. None.’

‘Those are the words that her uncle said to me moments before she burnt him alive and watched with a smile on her face, Gabriel. You weren’t there the night we found her, I was. I saw her. The real her. I know she’s been through hell. Things have happened to her I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy. Truly. But he was right. She has a darkness in her. And she *is* dangerous. Branding her was honestly the safest thing I could have done for all of us. And you better help me convince her of that before her temper and desire for vengeance destroys us all.’ He finishes the conversation, not willing to discuss it any further.

The leather in Grayson’s seat creaks as he turns to talk to Hendrix, giving him instructions on where to turn next. They engage in a mumbled conversation about the journey ahead, and Gabriel lowers his face to me.

After reading the guilt in my eyes, he sighs, leans down and gently kisses the top of my head.

‘I’m sorry,’ I whisper.

‘No. You’re not.’ His eyes go black. ‘Go to sleep, my love,’ he orders in a quiet whisper before I can protest.

Everything goes black as I fall into a deep and heavy sleep.

‘Lills... Lills?’ he whispers. The floor boards creak as he heads across the room.

My breathing gets heavier as I hide under my covers.

‘Lills, I know you’re awake.’ He stops at the edge of my bed. And he laughs to himself as he taps my duvet covered shoulder.

‘Lillyyyyy...’ he sings. ‘Oh, Lillyyyyy...’

He pulls off the duvet and tosses it to the floor, leaving me lying on the bed looking up at him. ‘Hello you. Long time no see.’

‘Ryan, please...’

His grin grows. His fingers twitch.

‘Hmm. Begging. I like it.’

‘Yeah,’ Toby agrees, appearing by the foot of my bed. ‘She always was a good beggar.’

They start mocking me.

‘Don’t kill me baby. Please...’ Both boys laugh.

More voices join in. My old bedroom at my uncle’s house starts to fill with people, all laughing at me and mimicking my cries for mercy.

Harry and Christa stand at the foot of my bed, half-burnt and decayed.

The bodies of Traitors start falling from the ceiling, landing on the floor with heavy thuds.

Jade is swinging by her neck in the doorway.

Malcolm watches on, his head, half-gone.

*More and more people start chanting. All the people who have died
because of me.*

Ghosts, seeking their revenge.

They all get closer. Closer. Closer!

My bed is surrounded. They reach out for me...

*A delicate female voice drifts over them. 'It's okay, my love. I've got
you. You're safe.'*

'Mum?'

*She appears on the bed, sat on her knees opposite me. Her loving smile
warms my heart and makes me miss her so much.*

*Then she screams furiously, launching herself on top of me with her
fingers around my neck.*

*I fall backwards. My bed turns into a bath, and she's holding me under
the water.*

I can't breathe!

Mummy... Why are you drowning me?

I sit up screaming, flailing my arms and legs. Gabriel engulfs me completely and pins me to his chest, holding down my arms so I can't hurt myself.

'Easy. Easy, Beautiful,' Gabriel soothes, holding me close. 'Take a breath, in and out. And realise where you are.' My face is buried in his chest as I pant and shake. My fingernails bury into his back as I cling to him. 'Where are you?'

'With you. Safe,' I reply, moving my face to his neck and breathing him in.

'That's right. You're with me. And you're safe. Open your eyes.' His fingers glide along my jaw and disappear beneath my hair so he can guide my face up to his. 'You're awake. It was just a bad dream. You're safe.'

I nod and take a breath.

‘You used your magic on me,’ I accuse. ‘I always have bad dreams when you make me sleep.’

‘You have bad dreams no matter what I do. You didn’t look right and I knew you hadn’t slept for a few days. And besides, I wasn’t going to risk you starting a fight with Grayson. I saw that look in your eye. You were going to open your mouth and be smart. I wasn’t gonna risk it. We’re in enough shit as it is.’ He’s short. To the point and annoyed. I notice I’m wearing different clothes and I’m clean. ‘I washed you and changed your clothes. No one else. You were covered in soot and ash. I had to get you clean.’

‘I didn’t wake up?’

‘I didn’t want you to. So no. You didn’t.’ He gets to his feet and takes a deep breath as I take a cursory glance around the room. It’s a very basic and bland bedroom. A double bed, single desk, a wardrobe and little television.

‘We’re in a hotel room,’ Gabriel tells me. ‘A shit hole in the arse end of nowhere. We can’t go to any of the other houses we own.’

‘Is everyone okay?’ I ask.

‘We lost several Nomads. Theo lost a lot more of his men. Most got away but we have two as prisoners. We’re going to interrogate them. Try and find Theo. Waste of time though. Theo will be in the wind by now. He wasn’t expecting you to have your magic and he certainly wasn’t expecting you to be that powerful. He abandoned his men so he’ll be regrouping somewhere. But Connor is fine. Thanks to you.’ He folds his arms across his chest and looks down at me with an unimpressed look on his face. ‘We need to have a conversation. No bullshit, Lilly. You hear me?’

I nod and struggle to swallow.

‘Did you burn down the house intentionally?’ he asks. ‘Stop chewing your lip and tell me the truth because I swear, if you lie to me-’

‘Yes,’ I reply honestly. ‘I did it on purpose.’

He seals his lips together and looks so furious as he takes a moment to gather himself.

‘Jesus Christ,’ he hisses suddenly. ‘For fuck’s sake, Lilly!’ He grabs at his hair and steps back. ‘Do you have any idea what you’ve done?’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t think about what I was destroying when I did it. I know your mothers stuff was in there and I’m-’

‘I don’t care about that!’ he says in an angry, shouting whisper. ‘Everything I cared about keeping I’ve had stashed away in a safety deposit box for months. Or kept in a chest back at the hotel room I keep.’

‘You have?’

‘I’m ready to leave at the drop of a hat. If we needed to leave quickly, we could have, and been well provided for.’

‘Then, why are you so angry?’

‘I’m angry because you decided to take it upon yourself to piss off Grayson and destroy the only real sanctuary we had.’

‘Sanctuary?’ I laugh, throwing off the blanket and getting to my feet, filling with anger myself. ‘That wasn’t a sanctuary. Or did you just miss the army that attacked us? Maybe you have forgotten your ex, hanging in our bathroom?’ I rub my throat which is still red raw from whatever was in those smoke canisters. With a tentative cough to clear my throat, I return to arguing with the man I love. Sadly, a pastime that is becoming all too regular. ‘The Orchard was not safe. Toby got in and Theo got in.’

‘It was all we had!’

‘BULLSHIT!’

‘Keep your voice down!’

‘Keep your own voice down,’ I bite back. ‘You have no right to be mad at me. Not after the shit you pulled.’

‘I have every goddamn right-’

‘You want a years-worth of bodies to pile up? You want Grayson to start cutting me to get my manifestations to happen? You want me to twiddle my thumbs as Toby works up to whatever sick endgame he has planned? For Theo to attack us *again*? Well tough. I won’t. And neither you or Grayson would let me do the spell while you continued deluding yourselves that we were safe in that gilded prison. And I’m not allowed to leave until the spell is done. Oh. And until we find Junior which is not going to happen.’

‘Why won’t it happen?’

I ignore his question and continue my tirade. ‘So I destroyed the house and forced us out into the world because now, he has no choice. We need to move quick before Hunters, Theo or Toby catch up with us.’

He stalks up to me, stopping close and breathing hard and fast. I don’t back up or falter in my resolve. I know that no matter how angry he gets with me, he won’t hurt me.

‘By doing such a disrespectful thing against him, you have put not just our safety on the line, but our friends too. Every day he’s coming up with different ways to separate us. Excuses to punish us.’ He kicks a stool across the room and slumps on the edge of the bed. I stay stock still on my feet, not knowing if moving or saying anything will help. So I just keep quiet. He looks up at me a little defeated. ‘He’s sent women to the house, Lilly. I’ve walked into our bedroom to a naked girl sprawled on our bed. My clothes staged around the floor to make it look like I’d betrayed you. He blames you for everything that goes wrong. A missing book. A misplaced knife. A dodgy look. And he’s ready to punish. Me. Amara. Collins. And You. He’s itching for an excuse.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ I sit beside him and rest my hand on his. ‘Why do you keep hiding things from me when we swore that we would be completely honest with each other?’

‘Because I didn’t want you to lose your temper and give him a legitimate reason to lash out at you.’

‘I wouldn’t-’

‘You burnt down his house,’ he sighs, turning to face me and

resting his palm on my cheek. 'I love you, Lilly Hooper. But you are not a calm or rational woman when faced with a problem. You tend to... react.'

'Me? React?' I shake my head and don't hide my smile. 'I'm a perfectly calm and sane young woman, I think you'll find.'

'You're bat shit bonkers with a temper like a Pitbull. Which I love, by the way. Before you get all pouty. I love it immensely. I love that you talk your mind and fight for what you think is right. But that mouth of yours gets you in all sorts of trouble and you don't see past the problem at hand. You never have.' As I go to argue, he rests his finger over my lips. 'My endgame is keeping us all alive and in one piece. If that means putting off the spell, or keeping small secrets from you in order for you not to freak out and do something drastic.'

'Like burn down your home?' I ask around the finger still pressed to my lips.

'Like burn down my home. Yeah.' He lowers his finger and takes my hands in his. 'How do you feel? After Theo and the manifestation? I heard you screaming. Christ.' He runs his fingers through his hair and shakes his head. 'Your screams were so filled with pain. It killed me to hear them.'

I guide his anguished face back to me. 'It hurt. I'm not going to lie and say I'm okay. My muscles really ache. Like, barely able to lift my arms kind of ache. He didn't hold back.' He strokes the length of my arms while hissing a swear word or two. I hate the harrowing look I've put in his eyes. 'But the manifestation was worth it. We're a step closer. Two more to go. Physical and Sight. And now pain has been used as a motivator, Grayson won't use it again. Like he said before. It's rare the same motivator can be used more than once. So at least his threats to torture me till I manifest can't be used anymore.'

'If you're trying to make me feel better, you're failing. Miserably.'

'Sorry.' I rest my head on his shoulder and look into the grimy little mirror on the desk opposite. 'We look like shit.' We're both pale, bruised, scratched-up and have dark circles under our eyes.

'Lilly?'

'Yeah?'

‘Hendrix told me about the fingers.’

‘Oh.’

‘What were you thinking? Cutting people like that?’

‘I don’t know.’ I shrug. ‘I guess I should feel bad about that. But I really don’t. I was so angry. I still am. For everything that man has done to us.’ I lift my hand and stretch out my remaining fingers. On my index finger are several deep teeth marks where Theo broke the skin. ‘He almost bit off another one. Sick bastard. I tossed the fingers I cut off his men at his feet and laughed.’ I lift my head and look up into his brilliant blue eyes. ‘It’s this little voice in my head urging me to do all this shit. Encouraging me to act out. To cut off those fingers as revenge. To blow up the house so I could leave.’

‘You’re... you’re hearing voices?’ he asks nervously, tucking my hair behind my ears. ‘I have to admit, that worries me. A lot.’

‘It’s my own voice,’ I assure him. ‘It’s just... a little darker than my usual one.’

‘Well, maybe you could stop listening to that voice? Grayson already thinks you’re getting a little... weird.’

‘I know. I heard him in the car.’ I sense Grayson’s magic getting closer. I look to the door and groan.

‘He’s coming, isn’t he?’ he asks. I nod.

‘You don’t think he’ll hurt Amara and Collins because of what I did, do you?’

His face is awash with uncertainty. He doesn’t need to say. I know the answer is yes, he probably will.

‘He’s really pissed, Lilly. But you saved his men and you manifested. So just convince him that the explosion was an accident and hopefully, he’ll leave his threats as just threats. You lost control. And you’re sorry. You’re really, really, sorry. Understand?’ I nod. The air vibrates as Grayson continues descending on us.

‘Fine. But no more deals with him unless we discuss it together.’

And no more secrets, Gabriel. I mean it. If I can't trust you-

'You can. A hundred percent honesty from here till the end of time. I promise. If, you promise me that you will stop listening to that little voice in your head and keep that fiery temper and sharp tongue of yours under wraps for a couple of days. At least till he's calmed down.'

'I promise. No more voices and my fiery temper and tongue will be under your keen instruction.'

He leans in and looks at my mouth.

'Promise?'

'I promise. Let's not fight.' I straighten the collar of his leather jacket. 'I hate fighting with you and that's all we seem to do these days.'

'But we always make up.' He grins. 'And making up with you is absofuckinglutely fantastic.' He leans in, his mouth resting close to mine and his hand settling on my lower back. 'Sometimes, I want to start a fight just so we can make up.'

'Well make up with me then.' I grin, tugging on his jacket so his lips crash into mine.

Just in time for Grayson to walk in.

'Gabriel. Out.' Grayson orders bluntly, not even looking at us.

We pull away from each other as Gabriel shakes his head. 'No chance. I'm not leaving you alone with her. You're too angry.'

'I really wasn't asking. Get out. Or I will throw you out and re-break her wrist as punishment for your disobedience. Your choice.'

'Go,' I tell him, with my best attempt at a comforting smile, tapping my hand on his lapel. 'It's fine. Besides, I'm starving and would love something to eat.'

He glances at his agitated brother. 'I'm not leaving you alone with him.'

‘Please.’ I stroke his concern filled face. ‘Go. If I need you, I’ll call. Take your own advice. Don’t make things worse.’

‘She says something sensible for a change,’ Grayson mutters, stepping aside and clearing the path to the door. ‘We have the whole floor. Find another room and wait while I talk to Miss Hooper in here.’

‘Like you said. You need me, you call me. Loudly. Got it?’

‘Got it.’ I nod. After a final and rather over the top kiss, he gets to his feet and leaves, glaring hatefully at his brother as he goes. The door shuts behind him, leaving Grayson and I alone. As I get to my feet, Grayson walks slowly towards me. His dark eyes not looking away. Not blinking. Not in the mood for forgiveness. He stops in front of me, looking down his nose with a furrowed brow. Not a word escapes my lips. I know that the best thing I can do is keep my mouth shut. A good call. As my silence seems deserving enough for him to backhand me hard across the face. The force of which knocks me to my knees and leaves me seeing spots. A metallic taste seeps into my mouth and sadly, it’s all too familiar. I wipe the blood clear, leaving a streak of red across my hand, and look up at him, still on my knees.

‘Feel better?’ I ask.

‘It helped.’ He sneers. Kneeling, he makes himself level with me. ‘You burnt down my house.’

‘It was an accident.’

‘You’re a filthy liar-’

‘I did everything I could to protect you and your men last night. My whole body feels like it’s been hit by a truck and I have a headache from hell. Theo almost broke my bones with his lightning, Grayson.’ I lift my three-fingered hand and show him the teeth marks. ‘He was about to bite my finger off before you got hold of the Bloodstone. The pain he inflicted on me made me manifest my Energy magic. Believe me. I suffered just as much as you. But this is good news. You should be happy-’

‘Happy?’ he hisses in my face and lifts me to my feet. ‘I am far from happy, Miss Hooper.’ He snatches my chin with his hands and leans into my face. ‘You destroyed my home. You tossed Hendrix out of the window-’

‘He landed on his feet, didn’t he?’

‘That is not the point.’

‘The point is, I saved your lives, Grayson. Despite you letting Hendrix have my Bloodstone and ordering him to refuse to give it to me, even if it meant my death. Despite the months of torture you have put me through. Despite branding me. Despite taking away my friends and threatening to hurt them. I still saved you all from the army that attacked and overrun your impenetrable fortress.’

‘You better watch your tone. I won’t be spoken to like that.’ He steps closer but I don’t back up. We’re nose to nose.

‘What more do you want from me? Huh? You brought me to your house for the sole purpose of performing your spell. You want the Veil down and I am doing everything I can to make that happen for you. You didn’t take me in out of the kindness of your heart and I’m trying, Grayson. I am trying my hardest to do what you need me to do. But you’re making it impossible. You either want me to lower the Veil or you don’t. There’s no in-between.

‘I want you to lower the Veil and save us!’ He leans over and picks up a newspaper that was left on the desk, and thrusts it into my hands. ‘This is not saving us, Lilly.’

The headline:

“Red lightning and crimson fire seen on the Cornish Coast.

Mysterious mansion left in ruins.”

He jabs his finger down on the paper. ‘Hunters will have read that. A dozen police officers saw your red flames. They saw your lighting come down from the sky and they will report it all to the Hunters. They’ll know about us by now. They’ll know our names. All our business associates. Our holdings. Everything. They’ll be out looking for Gabriel and me in force. I’ve had to send Nomads out to fetch as many of our belongings as possible. I’m emptying bank accounts left, right, and centre.’

‘Shit.’

‘Yes. Shit. We need to move quick before we are caught. You get your wish, Miss Hooper. We’re doing the spell as soon as we are able.’

‘We are?’ I grin. My joy makes his eye twitch, so I swiftly lose the smile.

‘Yes. We are. Hunters are coming. And without their magic, the Descendants are worse than dead. The last place you want to find yourself is in the Hunters hands without protection. So, we need to find Rebecca’s ring and your mother’s necklace, get you to this “stone” on Dartmoor, and in your words... “*see what happens*”. Gabriel will start looking into your memories straight away to see if we can find the necklace, and you will not fight him.’

‘I won’t fight him. I’ll do everything I can.’ Even if it breaks my heart to see the whole mess of the six-weeks. I’ll let him look.

‘And we need to track down the family who brought Rebecca Hopper’s ring from Hendrix. Connor is currently working on it. He’s sat on a laptop in one of the rooms down the hall searching for the family and any signs of the ring.’

‘I’ll help in any way I can.’

‘You need to manifest your Sight and your Physical powers. That is what you can do. We will see if the spell can be done without those manifestations, but we will still keep trying to get them. Agreed?’

‘I can do this, Grayson. The manifestations? The tests? The spell? I know I can do it.’

‘You better hope so. Because if you fail, the deaths of thousands will be on *your* conscience. Not mine. I look forward to seeing you realise exactly what you are in for. Because Rebecca Hooper was fierce. She was ten times the witch you are. And any challenges she has in place at these sites will be designed to test you to your absolute limit. Mentally, physically and magically. So... good job forcing my hand. If you die in these tests, we are all doomed.’ He turns and heads to the door.

‘That’s it? No punishments? You’re not going to hurt Amara?’

‘Amara and the others are safe if you do as you are told.’

‘And me?’

‘Would you like me to punish you?’ he asks, glancing at me over his shoulder with a smirk. ‘I could always put you over my knee.’ I roll my eyes and fold my arms across my chest. ‘Shame. I want to remind you, *Miss Hooper*, that just doing the spell isn’t the only condition of your release from my employment.’

‘Imprisonment,’ I correct him.

‘You are not going anywhere until I can guarantee the continuation of your bloodline.’

‘Could Gabriel be tested?’ I ask. ‘Perhaps whatever is causing his infertility can be fixed now. Modern health care is far more advanced-’

‘He’s been tested. Shortly after you woke up, after you almost died of blood poisoning. He insisted. Five doctors all reported the same. He can’t have children.’

He heads to the door and opens it up. Hendrix is on the other side with a tray of food in his hands. Grayson leaves and Hendrix heads inside.

‘It’s shitty hotel food. So probably tastes like cardboard. Ya did real good, Little Witch,’ he says, without a hint of his usual sarcasm as he places the tray down on the bed. ‘Ya saved a lot of folks and put the fear of God into Theo. I honestly didn’t think ya had it in ya.’ He turns with a genuine smile on his face and heads to the door. ‘And the thing with the fingers? Loved it.’

‘Err, thanks, I guess. I’m sorry I tossed you out the window.’

‘No, you’re not,’ he chortles.

‘No. Not really,’ I reply with a slight chuckle, lifting the burger he’s brought me. ‘I lived off scraps for years and this looks worse than anything I’ve ever eaten before.’

‘Like I said. Shitty hotel. Shitty food.’

When he opens the door, Gabriel is there. They pass each other with barely any acknowledgment.

As the door closes, I slump down onto the bed before handing him the plate. 'Fancy a lick? Check it's not poisoned?'

He sits beside me and takes the plate, shaking his head with his usual and beautiful half-smile. 'It would be my weird and gross pleasure. Right after you tell me everything that you and Grayson just spoke about.'

With a sigh, I tell him, 'We need to look into my memories. It's time we knew everything that happened in the missing six-weeks. And we need to do it now.'

'I told you. We don't have to actually look. I'll just tell Grayson all I found was blackness. An empty void. No memories whatsoever.'

'I need you to look. I need the necklace.'

'Then we should talk to Bias-'

'-Toby.'

'He's probably got it.'

'You would rather look for Toby than look into my mind?'

'I would rather anything than let you feel any of the misery that I know you will suffer by learning the truth of those weeks.'

'I won't Break.'

'You don't know that for sure.' He places the plate down and gets to his feet. I watch him wear down the carpet as he starts pacing. Up and down he goes. Up and down. His fingers play with the necklace I made him for Christmas. Every time he hears a car engine outside, he peeks through the thick net curtain blocking the window. He's so wound up, it's setting me on edge. On his third stop at the window to watch a milk van, I get to my feet and go to him. I rest my face on his back. My arms fold around him and my palms lay flat on his chest. His heart is pounding like crazy and his body is so tense it's like hugging a statue.

‘Please calm down,’ I tell him softly. ‘If your heart beats much faster it could break. It has a hole in it now, remember?’

‘The only thing that will break my heart is losing you,’ he sighs, closing the curtain and turning to face me. I keep hold of him and peer up as he leans down. His dark hair falls over his eyes as they close. ‘Each time you look into those memories of the missing six-weeks, you start to slip. When you saw what Bias-’

‘-Toby.’

‘What he did to you in that barn, I almost lost you.’ He runs his fingers through my hair and watches it with unease. ‘It started to go white. I already lost my brother to a Break. I can’t lose you too. I just can’t.’

‘And I promise you that you won’t. Hey.’ I take his face in both my hands. His eyes open and I see them swimming with a grief that he doesn’t need to feel. ‘I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere. We’re both okay and we have each other. Amara and Collins are together and are safe as long as we do what we need to do. And what we need to do is the spell. So help me. Please, Gabriel. You have to help me find the necklace.’ I wait and watch him as he thinks. ‘Baby, please. I can’t do this alone.’

‘Fine. Okay.’ He concedes and pulls me in to his embrace. I have to stand on my tiptoes to reach my arms around his neck. ‘I’ll look. But you have to be strong. Okay? Whatever we see, we face together. You can’t let it Break you.’

‘It won’t. I promise it won’t.’



We’re sitting face to face, cross-legged on the floor of the dank hotel room with the curtains closed and the lamps on. Grayson stands by the door flanked by Billy and Hendrix. I’m given access to my magic to help with the process. If I’m looking and Gabriel’s looking, we’re more likely to find something. And because I have access to my magic, Grayson is well guarded. Billy has his phone to his ear. One word. A single word of Grayson’s choosing is all he would have to say and the person on the other end of the line will kill Amara.

‘Ignore them,’ Gabriel encourages as I look back to him and not the three men by the door. ‘Focus on me. You remember what we did last time?’

I nod. I remember sitting on Grayson’s office floor and letting him in to my mind.

‘It will feel uncomfortable. But don’t push me out. You have to let me in to look.’

‘I will. I promise.’ My clammy hands tighten on his as I nod my head. ‘Where do we start?’

‘I want you to think of the days leading up to when Bias left. I want you to pinpoint the last time you think you remember seeing the necklace, and we’ll go from there.’

‘Toby,’ I correct him. ‘His name is Toby. Not Bias. Bias is gone. You know that, right?’

‘Fine. *Toby*. Think of the days leading up to that event and we’ll see if we can spot your necklace. Okay?’

‘Okay. But, Gabriel... What you see won’t be pretty. The last few days at Harry’s weren’t pleasant.’

‘Whatever we see, we’ll face it together. And remember. It’s just memories. Those days are gone. You survived it.’

‘This is all very touching. But can we get on with it?’ Grayson mutters.

Gabriel and I both glare at him.

Insensitive twat.

‘You’ll be fine, Little Witch.’ Hendrix nods with certainty. ‘You’re a tough cookie. Ya got this.’

Everyone looks at him with a slightly raised brow.

‘What?’ he shrugs. ‘I can’t be supportive?’

‘No,’ Grayson and Gabriel reply at exactly the same time.

Hendrix rolls his eyes before they settle on me. As does everyone else's.

Gabriel squeezes my fingers. 'Ready, Beautiful?'

'Ready.'

His hands settle on either side of my head and we close our eyes.

Here we go.

With Gabriel beside me, I watch my memory play out before us.

We're in the bathroom back at my uncle's home, long before it burnt to the ground. It was the one downstairs which the staff used to use. The tiles were chipped and the hot water came out murky. Inside the bathroom, Harry and Mr Simmons are watching me as I sit on the toilet. Back in the real world, I feel how hard my heart is hammering. Seeing them so vividly stirs up some serious hatred within me. I remember how my bladder refused to unclench despite the fact that I hadn't peed in almost twelve hours and my body was aching with the weight of urine. It was Harry watching me that stopped it from happening. His brow is so furrowed, I can count a dozen lines on his forehead. His skin is so red it's almost glowing and the beads of sweat trickling down his temple tell me one thing.

Harry Hooper, is furious.

His body shakes. His fists are clenched. And his teeth are ground together.

'So, that's Harry Hooper?' Gabriel mutters.

'Yep. That's Uncle Harry, and that brute beside him is Mr Simmons.'

'The man who taught you-'

'Everything. Yeah.'

'Did they usually watch you on the toilet?'

'No. But this day wasn't like any other day.'

The version of me on the toilet bites my lip and closes her eyes, willing her body to just pee and get it over with. But she's trembling so much, she has to grip the toilet seat to keep herself steady as her other hand holds the digital pregnancy test between her legs.

‘Get on with it!’ Harry roars, making me jump and her yelp. Her bladder unclenches at the fright and she pees. She sobs as she does. I remember how terrified I was at what would happen after, and the words I repeated to myself in my head.

Please, please don't be positive. Please. Please. Please.

After a few seconds, Harry snatches the stick from her hands. Urine drips on the floor as he watches the window. A low, guttural growl echoes around the bathroom as she pulls up her trousers and gets to her feet.

Her hands knot together in front of her as she glances past Harry's shoulder to Mr Simmons. But he shows no support or comfort. Offers no word in her defense. He has a look of disgust in his judgmental eyes.

‘Harry knew my cycle,’ I tell Gabriel. ‘He was always oddly observant of it. Insisted that he had proof that I was bleeding at the right time and for the right amount of days, every, single month.’

Gabriel watches the scene play out with a hateful grimace. ‘Look at you shaking,’ he says darkly. ‘You're so small and so frightened. What was wrong with those people?’

‘I remember every thought that went through my head in this moment. I thought if I was stronger, I could charge past them and run. But Harry told me they stopped people in the streets to test people to see if they were magic or not. Everyone out in the world wanted people like me dead. He said Witch Hunters were everywhere. I thought about taking off my binding spell and using my magic to protect myself. But it was so unpredictable. I could never control it well enough. I'd probably end up killing myself rather than-’

‘You stupid, foolish, whore of a girl,’ Harry snarls, cutting off my words. ‘You evil little monster, you. How dare you!’ He tosses the stick at her feet. The little window blinks the words:

Pregnant 4-6weeks

To this day, I've never seen such anger and hatred in another's eyes as I did in this moment.

‘Who is the man that did this?’ Harry demands. Her mouth barely

moves and no sound whatsoever comes out as she stares at him in shock. 'WHO IS THE FATHER?'

She jumps back and stumbles further away from him as he yells. Her hand rises to her belly and rests over it protectively. He sees the subconscious act and scoffs hatefully and disgustedly at it. Like she's cradling a dead rodent in her palm.

'Is it someone in this house?' he orders. When she doesn't answer, he rushes forwards and clamps his thick fingers down on her throat. Her back hits into the porcelain sink.

'Harry, please!' she wails, wrapping her arms across her belly. 'Don't hurt-' He squeezes hard, cutting off her air and her voice. She can only plead for the safety of her unborn baby with her eyes. But he doesn't see nor care.

'Is – the – father – one – of – you?' He snarls each word. Saying it slowly and menacingly. She doesn't answer. Because she can't. She claws at his hand. 'IS HE A WITCH?!' he roars.

She nods. That's all she can do.

'I should have lied. Told him it was a one of the gardeners. I was just so scared.'

'None of this is your fault,' Gabriel says firmly, taking my hand in his. 'None of it.'

Harry tosses her like a ragdoll to the floor. As she falls, she protects her stomach. Her head connects hard with the tiles and knocks the sense out of her. As he starts to descend, fists ready, teeth clenched and a murderous rage like none I've ever seen, she scurries away. The knock has made it impossible for her to get up. She bumps into the feet of Mr Simmons and looks up at him.

'Help me. Please.'

But he just yanks her to her feet by her hair and spins her round to face Harry.

He walks past and takes her from Mr Simmons' grasp. She's dragged out of the bathroom and down the hall. Gabriel and I follow. We pass a maid, who lowers her head and shifts out the way. We pass

the gardener, who nods at Harry and ignores her completely, as he always did. Her screams echo through the house. Her pleas for help, for mercy, they go ignored. By everyone. They're paid well not to hear her. She reaches for the binding spell knotted round her wrist.

I was ready to tear it off and use my magic. I'd have done anything to save my baby. I'd risk Hunters. It had been a matter of minutes, and I already loved the life growing inside me more than I had ever loved anyone. My mum. Toby. Myself.

Harry sees her efforts. He stops, spins her, and his fist collides with her face with force.

'Christ!' Gabriel roars as if he's seeing it all for real. 'What the hell?!' Harry didn't hold back one bit. She falls backwards, blood splattered all over her face and a broken nose. Standing over her, he shakes his head.

'Mr Simmons,' Harry says. 'Be a good chap and disarm her so she can't undo the binding spell, would you?' A smile plays on his lips as Simmons, ever the faithful dog, bends down, takes her wrist, and yanks her arm hard. There's a pop as her shoulder dislocates.

As she screams, Gabriel looks away, shaking with anger. He can't look. But they're about to move, so we have to move too if we're to stay with the memory. Simmons takes her ankle and starts dragging her down the corridor. One hand drags behind her on the carpet as the other rests over her belly.

They reach the stairs and start to climb, pulling her limply behind them. The back of her head connects with each and every step. Weakly and barely conscious, she tries to grab the banister to make him stop. But her grip slips every time. Her begging is making no impact on them. The men talk as though she's not even there.

'I'll call Jennings in the morning,' Simmons says, hauling me up the flight of stairs. 'If the price is right, he'll be discreet.'

'As long as he's effective,' Harry replies. 'We can't risk another witch being born.'

'He'll get it done, Sir. I assure you,' Simmons says with confidence. 'Or...'

‘Or?’

‘Well, sir. There is always the alternative. I know you have always dismissed it. Saying that you owe it to her mother. But I believe that it may be time. I think that you have fulfilled your duty. And then some.’ The two men look at each other. ‘Save the money, Sir. No need to pay the vet. Rid yourself of the burden for good.’

‘It would see you out of a job, Mr Simmons,’ Harry says. ‘Killing my niece.’

‘I have saved my wages, sir. Enough to see me retire comfortably. No need to make a mess. There is a patch where some Belladonna grows. Down by the old willow at the end of the garden. Fill her belly with the poison and we could bury her in its shade. No one ventures down there.’

‘If you kill me,’ she garbles, her head thumping the steps. ‘He’ll come for you. And he will kill you. You have no idea who you’re messing with.’

They both laugh and continue discussing whether to murder me and my child, or just my child.

They reach the top landing and she’s pulled towards the attic door. She gets the same treatment up those stairs too and they continue talking about what to do as calmly as you like.

She’s then dragged inside and abandoned on the floor.

Harry kneels by her head. ‘Now, girl. You listen and you listen closely. Tomorrow, Jennings will come and deal with this problem. When it’s done, the man who did this to you will never find you again. I’ll see to it. And you will never see daylight as long as you live.’

‘B-but, Jennings is a vet!’

‘And you’re a monster. He’ll manage.’

‘You can’t do this!’

‘If you try and remove that binding spell and attempt to leave this house, one of two things will happen: One. Hunters will find you and they will take you. They will screw you with red hot poker. They will

flay the skin from your body. They will crush you under rock so your bones will break, and know that none of that will kill you. Because your death will end their fun.’ He watches as her lip trembles and tears stream down her blood-soaked face. ‘Option two. *We* will find you.’ He gestures between himself and Simmons. ‘And *we* will kill you. Your body will be buried where no one will ever find you.’ His eyes flick to her belly. ‘You and your spawn both. Understand?’

He stands, and he leaves. Tossing the test at her feet as she closes her tear-filled eyes.

Her hand reaches up and just before she passes out, she caresses the star pendant resting around her neck. As she falls unconscious, the world fades to black. And Gabriel and I return to the floor of the hotel room.

I blink Gabriel back into focus. Despite the murderous rage on his features, a tear slides down his face. His hands travel down from my temple to my cheeks so he can wipe my sadness dry and I do the same for him, catching the solitary tear as it travels past the corner of his mouth.

‘If you ever again feel an ounce of guilt about killing your uncle, I will never forgive you. Do you hear me?’ I hear the strain in his voice. ‘Never, ever feel bad about what you did to him. He deserved so much more.’

‘Killing him wasn’t okay. Killing anyone-’

‘Some men need to die. He was one of them.’

‘What did you see?’ Grayson asks gently from the door.

I nod to Gabriel, so he tells him.

‘The last time Lilly consciously remembers wearing the necklace was the day Harry discovered she was pregnant.’ He looks up at his brother but remains sat on the floor with me, his thumb tracing back and forth across my cheek. ‘He beat her and was organising a half-rate vet to come and abort her child the following morning. He was brutal.’

‘Harry Hooper was a big man. He must have really hurt you,’ Grayson says sadly. ‘I am sorry for the pain he caused and for the loss

that followed.'

'Spare her your fake condolences. You're no bet-'

'I passed-out holding the necklace in my hand,' I interrupt. Gabriel is really upset and angry. Which means he's running with no filter. Grayson's eye twitches at Gabriel's outburst. But he chooses to ignore it, knowing that there are bigger things to be dealing with right now.

'Was it there when you woke up?' he asks me calmly.

'I don't remember,' I sigh with a heavy heart. Because I know what we need to do. I return Gabriel's hands to my temple. 'Let's have a look.'

We're in darkness. All I can see is Gabriel by my side. Then a voice travels through the void like an echo.

'Red? Hey, Red, wake up! Christ. What the hell did you do this time to piss off the fat bastard?' The sound of a slap returns us to my room in the attic. The sun has set and the past version of me is still on the floor. Toby gently laughs to himself as he helps her up. She slumps against his chest and I see the relief in her face that he's there. Despite him finding her appearance amusing and waking her with a sharp slap across the face, she's so happy he's there. He brushes the hair from her bloody and bruised face.

'Oh, Red...' Toby sighs, but I see the slight smile he tries to hide. 'The messes you get yourself into. I told you, if you're going to disobey him, either don't get caught or don't let him catch you.' Leaning down, he kisses her mouth possessively, ignoring the dried blood and her lack of response.

I glance sideways to Gabriel who looks at the whole interaction with disgust.

Toby notices her dislocated shoulder and pops it back into place for her. Then, his eyes drift past her. 'What the fuck is this?' Toby demands, getting to his feet so fast, he lets the other version of me fall backwards on the floor. Toby reaches over and picks up the pregnancy test, those lilac-eyes widen as he clasps it in both his hands. 'What the fuck is this, Red?'

She pushes herself up, laying her arm over her belly protectively.

He holds up the stick. 'Is this a fucking joke?'

She shakes her head and Toby grabs at his hair and starts cursing furiously. He's livid, but the version of me that sways doesn't seem to notice. Or perhaps care. I was used to his temper.

'Harry's going to kill it,' she tells him. 'You have to get us out of here, Toby.' She rushes towards him and takes his hand. Her eyes are wide and hopeful. Like her white knight has arrived.

God, I was a clueless idiot.

His face is etched in shock.

'Toby. You have to get us out of here. My uncle is going to force an abortion on me and if I refuse, he's going to kill me.' She gives him a little shake and he snaps out of his odd little trance.

'You're on the pill!' He starts looking around the room as if he's going to find them. 'You're on the pill. You can't be.'

'I am,' she insists. 'I'm pregnant. And now, I need your help. We need your help.' She reaches out and takes his hand before resting it on her belly. He looks down and gazes at it. His thumb traces back and forth and after a moment, he smiles. Not his usual, mischievous grin, but a genuine, happy smile that softens his whole face and warms his eyes. He shifts closer and I remember loving that look he had. The look a man should have when he sees the woman he loves carrying his baby.

But with a blink, that man goes. In a second, he remembers who he truly is. And cold lilac-eyes meet hers. He shoves her away and shakes his head.

'You will let Harry kill that thing inside you.'

'What?' she whispers. 'No! Toby, this baby. It's yours!'

'Well I fucking know that!' he snaps back. 'Which is precisely why you're getting rid of it!'

'I won't. I won't! And nothing you say or do will ever make me

change my mind.'

He flies into a rage. Throwing anything and everything he can get his hands on around the room. It's so violent, Gabriel actually steps in front of me as if to protect me. It's so ingrained in him to keep me safe, he's doing it even when it's nothing more than a memory.

Toby stalks up to her and snaps the test in two before throwing it as hard as he can at her face.

'You will get rid of it,' he warns with finality.

'I won't.' I love the defiance I had when I said that to him. Even now, I fill with pride. For all the good it did me.

'You get rid of it, Red. Or you and I are done.'

'Then we're done.' The words came easily. Words I never thought I would be able to say to him. Words I never wanted to say to him. But in that moment, they were true. One hundred percent. 'If you don't want us, then fine, Toby. Fine. You never have to see us again. But you have to help me get out of here and away from Harry. I have no money. No place to go. Help me get somewhere safe. You owe me that at least.'

'I owe you shit, Lilly. I already saved your life once. I'm done.'

'What an evil, cowardly little fuck,' Gabriel snarls beside me. 'How could he... I mean... I would never...'

'I know you would never. You're nothing like him. But look.' I point to her neck where the necklace still lies. 'I'm still wearing it.'

And I'm still wearing it when Toby storms past me to the window. I watch her grab his arm and try to stop him. I watch as he backhands her hard and knocks her to the floor.

'I'll be back here in two days and if that thing is still inside you, I will beat it out of you. Do you hear me? You got yourself into this. You will get yourself out of it.'

And those were the last words I remember him saying to me. He left out the window and fled into the darkness. I follow the battered and devastated version of myself as she heads to the window to watch

him disappear beyond the tree line.

I look at her face. At the utter heartbreak that claims every inch of her. And my heart breaks for her because I remember what she is feeling in this exact moment. Her heart splintered and shattered into a thousand pieces. Her insides felt as heavy as lead. A deep grief consumed her and she couldn't breathe.

She didn't want to.

She slumps against the window frame and stares at the darkness. Outside, the rain is hammering down hard. Lightning flashes across the sky and she watches him disappear completely, and with him, any hope I had for a future which didn't involve pain and misery.

'This is it,' I tell Gabriel, while watching the devastated version of myself. 'This is the last thing I remember. I'm still wearing the necklace.'

'So after this, what do you remember?'

'He left... And then I woke up in the cellar six-weeks later.'

He joins me by my side and looks solemnly into my eyes. Before they go black and he takes control.

'Show me what happened next.'

The lightning flashes across the sky once more and as it does, my old bedroom disappears.

Suddenly we're standing somewhere else entirely. Somewhere I never wanted to see again. Piles of hay and broken farming machinery line the wooden walls. It's raining. Drops of water fall through the cracks in the roof. The beams are slightly off their centre.

'No. No-no-no-no Gabriel, stop!'

We're in the Miller's barn.

I'm lying on the ground with my wrists bound above my head by chains attached to the floor. The girl is holding my feet down and stretching me out as I try to kick her away. Around us are six men. Their arms are folded as they encircle us, watching with an eerie

silence. Standing over me... is Toby.

‘Let me out!’ I order Gabriel. But he’s frozen in the memory he’s unknowingly compelled us into. He told me to show him what happened next. This is all I know happened next. His poor choice of words has landed us here and his horror has him transfixed. Her screams for help are agony to hear. My screams. I cover my ears and look at Gabriel. He wasn’t expecting to be here. Neither was I. But he knows what happened and he’s watching it like a car crash he can’t look away from.

‘You can’t have a baby, Lilly,’ Toby says. ‘I can’t let you.’

‘Gabriel! Let me out!’

‘She’s yours!’ she cries. ‘She’s your baby. Please, Toby. I’m sorry I left. I won’t do it again. I swear. I’ll come with you if that’s what you want. We can be happy! Don’t listen to that woman. Listen to me!’

‘Shit...’ Gabriel whispers, utterly lost in the moment of evil he’s about to witness. A moment I can’t face again. I run to him and try to guide his face away. I don’t want him to see.

‘You can’t have this baby,’ Toby repeats, shaking his head and sniffing as he continues to cry. ‘And you refuse to have the abortion. You have left me with no choice.’ He takes a step back.

‘GABRIEL!’ I scream, ‘LET ME OUT!’

‘If you don’t want her, fine!’ she sobs. ‘You’ll never see us again. Please, please don’t hurt my baby. I’m begging you. I’ll do anything just, please. Let me go. Please...’

‘Oh God...’ Gabriel groans, his face scrunched up in despair as he continues watching. ‘Oh Bias... Don’t do this.’

I know that Toby’s lifted his boot. I know that it’s hovering over my exposed belly. I only saw this moment once but I dream about it every night.

‘She’s all I have. Don’t take her away. Toby... please.’ My voice is a shrill panic. A complete desperation. Gabriel steps back, shaking his head, but still watching in dismay.

‘I’m sorry,’ Toby says. ‘I am so sorry. But you can’t have this baby. You can never have a baby.’

‘FOCUS! DO IT!’ The mysterious girl screams. ‘YOU HAVE TO!’

I watch Gabriel’s face as he listens to her. He does a double blink and his brow furrows at the sound of her voice. ‘No fucking way,’ he whispers. I want to ask what he saw. What he heard. But my screams and sobbing as I struggle on the floor are all that I can think about. And I can’t bear to see what happens next.

‘Gabriel Kendryk, let me out now!’ I scream in his face. My own eyes blacken. ‘LET ME OUT!’

Gabriel releases me from his hold and I shuffle backwards across the carpet until my back hits the bed. I’m panting and shaking uncontrollably. Each breath is strained and it’s only getting harder to inhale with every passing second. Tears stream down my face. My magic fades and I jump when Grayson appears in front of me on his knees. His mouth is moving and he’s talking quickly. But I can’t hear the words he’s saying. I can’t understand or process anything beyond the sound of my screams from the barn. They’ve followed me into the hotel room. I know that those screams will never leave me. Ever. Grayson takes my face and forces me to look at him. There’s no anger on his features. He’s worried. His eyes are wide in concern as I gasp and tremble.

‘Gabriel,’ he barks over his shoulder. ‘Pull yourself together. She needs you!’

But Gabriel isn’t fairing any better than me. He’s staring into the distance like he’s empty. His face is whiter than I’ve ever seen it. He saw Toby begin his attack.

‘Gabriel!’ Grayson barks, still holding me up as I sob uncontrollably.

‘He did it, Grayson...’ Gabriel whispers in a traumatised state. ‘He... he...’

‘For god’s sake man. Get it together. Help your girl before she Breaks!’ But Gabriel is lost to the awful realisation that his brother did do what I said he did. Not that he doubted me. But I guess seeing it is far worse than just hearing about it. I know for sure that it is for me.

‘Lilly, sweetheart, you need to calm down.’ Grayson gives up on trying to talk to Gabriel and instead focuses on me. He’s scared I’m going to Break. I admit, it’s tempting to never having to feel this heartbreak ever again.

But I’m stronger than that.

I’m stronger than Toby.

Grayson keeps hold of my face and watches me intently. His eyes continue searching mine, looking for the slightest hint of lilac, I’m sure.

He starts taking deep breaths and tells me to copy him. Just as he did the night we met. Slow and deep inhales and exhales, all the while he looks into my eyes, telling me that I’m safe from my past. That it was just a memory and it’s over now. My throat eases and becomes less constricted with every breath. My fingers are gripping onto his sleeves so tight, I’m basically clawing at him. I don’t look away as he helps me to calm.

‘That’s it,’ he encourages as I get my rasping gasps under control. ‘Good girl. Nice and slow breaths. That’s fantastic. Great job.’ He smiles a kind and gentle smile while nodding. ‘You’re alright. You’re safe.’ Another couple of minutes and he pats my shoulder before turning to his brother who is still staring into nothing. Grayson kneels in front of him and rests his hand on his arm. Gabriel lifts his gaze and they look at each other.

‘What did you see?’

‘S-she wasn’t wearing the necklace in the barn,’ he replies, swallowing hard against the suffering he’s trying to keep inside.

‘You saw the barn?’

Gabriel nods. ‘I didn’t mean to. I compelled her to show me what happened after Toby abandoned her at her uncle’s house and... and... Bias is really gone, Grayson. He’s gone. There’s no way our little brother would do what that monster did. He’s... he’s evil now. There’s no coming back from what he did to her. None.’

‘I know. I know.’ He gives Gabriel’s shoulder a comforting squeeze.

‘Bias is dead. But Lilly is still here and she needs you now.’ Gabriel blinks and looks over his shoulder to me. And if it’s even possible, his misery grows.

‘Don’t look at me like that,’ I whimper pathetically. How can anyone love such a victim? How could anyone ever want to be with someone so broken?

As I watch him, his entire face hardens. It turns as cold as anything I’ve ever seen. Pain and sadness is washed away and replaced with a look so murderous it makes me cold to witness it. He looks at Grayson.

‘The lack of the necklace wasn’t the only thing I noticed.’

‘What else did you see?’

Gabriel gets to his feet. ‘It’s not what I saw. It’s what I heard.’ He storms past Grayson and snatches up his leather coat.

‘Gabriel, where are you going?’ Grayson is up and rushing after him. As Gabriel heads to the door, he takes hold of his elbow and spins him around. ‘What did you hear?’

‘He was going to stop, Grayson. I saw it. Toby hesitated. His eyes started to turn back to brown. His hair began to change. His Break was fading and Bias was winning. He was going to stop.’

‘Then, why didn’t he?’

‘There was a woman there. She held Lilly down in the barn. She saw him changing and convinced him to do it. If she hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have done it. Bias would have come back and Lilly’s baby would be alive.’

‘A woman?’ Grayson turns to me. ‘*The* woman? The one he used to make you watch him with?’

I nod.

Grayson returns his attention to Gabriel. We all do. ‘You heard her voice?’

‘Yes.’

‘You recognised it?’

Gabriel finishes putting on his jacket and snarls, ‘Yes.’

‘Who was she?’

‘Who do you think, Grayson?’ He shrugs off his brother’s hand and heads to the door. ‘It was Ava-fucking-Sinclair.’

‘I’m fine. I said I’m fine!’ I tell Hendrix in a deadpan voice as he tries to help me to my feet.

Gabriel’s charged off. Grayson’s chasing after him and telling him to stop. Gabriel says he won’t stop. Not until he gets his hands on Ava and uses them to wring her neck.

All the while, I struggle not to vomit all over the floor. I stagger towards the bathroom, dodging Hendrix’s attempts to help me walk in a straight line. Words fail me as it all sinks in. I kick the bathroom door closed and find the toilet to wretch into.

I force myself to my feet and cling onto the sink, swaying slightly. My head is too full of noise and my insides squirm with disgust and revulsion. It’s taking all my mental strength to keep myself together. I look at my reflection in the mirror. I’m sweating. My lip is split. I have bruises and scrapes. My hair’s a ratty mess. I’m pasty and thin. I have a harrowing look in my eyes.

And I hate myself for allowing myself to let these people turn me into this... victim.

Ava.

She’s been in my life for the last few months and she’s been laughing at me for years. The memory of the barn. Of the mysterious woman who held me down. Who laughed at me as I was forced to watch Toby fuck her. She did everything possible to destroy my relationship with Gabriel.

Ava.

The door opens and Gabriel walks in still wearing his coat. I watch him in the mirror as he stands in the doorway.

‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left. I wasn’t thinking.’ He walks quickly towards me and goes to stroke my back. ‘Are you alright? Let me help-’

‘Don’t. Don’t touch me.’ I sneer at his hands like they’re covered in shit. ‘Don’t touch me with hands you touched her with.’

‘Don’t. That’s not fair. That’s not-’

‘I need you to leave.’

‘Lilly, please! For fuck’s sake. Don’t-’

‘You were with her while I was in the cellar, weren’t you? While I was starving and pissing over a drain? While I was being beaten and tormented in the dark, she lay in your arms. You were inside her and she was happy. And she knew. She knew who you were to Toby. She’s taken everything from me. She took Toby. She took my baby and she took you!’

He takes another desperate step towards me and I dodge him. ‘You can’t seriously hold her against me? You know she meant less than nothing to me. I hate her. I fucking hate her guts. If I’d known about you, I would have got you out. You know that! Baby... I love you!’

‘Maybe I do know all that. And when I’ve calmed down I may very well apologise to you for saying this. But right now, I can’t even look at you.’ And I can’t. I keep looking at the chipped tiled floor or his feet instead. ‘Because all I can see is you kissing her. Touching her. And her screaming words of encouragement at Toby to...’ I shake my head violently and back away from him. ‘I need you to leave.’

‘I’m not leaving you.’

‘I want you to go.’

‘No!’

I turn and strike the mirror. It shatters around my fist before I turn back to him. ‘Get away from me!’ I threaten through gritted teeth.

‘Lilly... don’t. Don’t leave me. Please. I had no idea. Please. Please tell me what to do to fix this!’

‘You find her, Gabriel. You find her and you make her pay. Do you hear me? Grayson won’t let me leave. But *you* can.’

‘No way I’m leaving you.’

‘I need you to. I need to rid myself of this hatred before it sticks to you for good.’ I turn and lean over the sink. My hair falls over my face as I take deep breath after deep breath. ‘Just-go.’

‘I love y-’

‘Get out.’

‘I think you should leave,’ Grayson says, appearing from around the door. ‘Let her calm down. She’s clearly upset.’

‘Oh, you’re loving this,’ Gabriel snarls back. ‘Any wedge between Lilly and I, and you think you can just slide right in between us. Well you can’t.’

‘No. Ava’s already done that,’ Hendrix snorts from the bedroom.

Grayson takes a calm step forwards, blocking Gabriel from going in there to attack.

‘I’m suggesting you leave her alone for a while. Not leave her entirely. She’s clearly very upset and could do with some space.’

‘Instead of inserting yourself into my relationship, why don’t you get on the phone and ensure that Ava is secured. She probably knows where Toby is. She’s obviously a spy.’

‘We don’t know that. You didn’t see her face.’

‘I heard her. I know her voice, Grayson. I heard her scream at Toby to *“Do it”*.’

‘To be fair, Boss. If anyone knows what Ava Sinclair sounds like screaming those words, it’s gonna be him,’ Hendrix laughs.

Again, Gabriel goes for the vampire who laughs at him from the bedroom. Grayson keeps a firm hold of him and remains as calm as could be.

‘I’ll make some calls and get her confined. We will find out exactly what part she has been playing in all this, but right now,’ Grayson looks at me. ‘She needs looking after. I won’t have her Break. Do you

hear me?’

‘I don’t want him here. Go find Ava. Find Toby. And leave me alone.’ I sink to the floor, pull up my knees and bury my face in my arms. ‘Just leave me alone.’



Hours pass, I think. It certainly feels that way when I open the door and return to the bedroom. I know that Grayson and Gabriel aren’t in here. I can’t sense them. But I wasn’t expecting Hendrix to be sprawled out on the bed watching television and eating a bowl of popcorn. He has his phone to his ear and is mumbling away with his eyes glued to the television screen.

‘Do vampires even need to eat?’ I ask.

He gives the person on the other end a brief goodbye and returns the phone back into his pocket. ‘Not food. No,’ he says, chewing with his mouth open like a cow munching grass. ‘But I like the taste of butter popcorn.’ He lolls his head lazily to the side and offers me some.

‘Think I’ll pass.’ Leaning against the door frame, I fold my arms across my chest and look out to the hallway.

‘They’re not up here. Boss took lover-boy down to the bar for a drink to calm down. He was all ready to go kill the leggy-blondie, but Grayson stopped him.’

‘I told him to go and find Ava.’

‘Shockingly enough, Grayson doesn’t give two shits about what ya want or what ya ordered anyone to do. Ya need pretty-boy here. Ain’t no way Boss-man gonna send him away. Not yet anyway.’ He carries on stuffing popcorn in his face, letting the odd one miss and fall to the bed sheets.

‘I don’t need anyone.’

‘Oh yeah,’ he laughs. ‘Ya do. You’re one more nasty revelation away from white-haired-psycho-ville, and then where will we be? Dead. Cos you’ll have killed us all in a fiery rage.’

‘I’m not going to give into the Break,’ I shrug simply. ‘I’m stronger than that. Every knock is just making me stronger. More determined.’

‘Yeah. Stronger until the final straw breaks the camel’s back. The camel’s back being your sanity.’

He carries on scoffing popcorn and starts laughing at the television. I head over and sit on the edge of the bed.

‘What are you watching?’

‘Talk show.’

‘A what?’

‘Oh yeah. I forgot ya lived in a hole underground,’ he says, but I don’t think he meant it as a dig. He sits up and swallows his mouthful before gesturing to the T.V. ‘Basically, all these people come on the stage and argue. See the skinny bald prick there? He’s being accused of shagging his wife’s sister, cos she found a pair of knickers that don’t belong to her under his pillow. And the bald prick is insisting that they were put there to break ’em up cos he says the sister has dick-fever and wants him to herself.’

I do love his eloquence. ‘And what’s the point of the show? You just watch them argue?’ The toothless woman hurls abuse at the hairless man who’s clearly guilty as sin. He jiggles his leg and bites his nails. There’s so much sweat pouring off him, I wonder if they’ll need to get a mop after he’s left the stage.

‘The pompous host lets them hash it out and then he reads the results of a lie detector.’

‘A what?’

‘Christ...’ he mutters, licking the salt and butter from his fingertips. ‘A test that can tell if someone’s lying or not. A lie detector. A fucking lie detector!’

‘Alright. Bloody hell. Keep your hair on.’ I lean back on the bed and help myself to a handful of popcorn. ‘You don’t need a lie detector to see that idiot is a liar.’

‘Well, can you blame him?’ He gestures to the screen. ‘Look at the state of his wife.’

‘You think he cheated because of how she looks?’ I ask, as the woman propels herself across the stage towards her husband while screaming profanities. It’s just a long string of bleeping and gasps from the audience as some poor bloke acting as security tries to hold her back. In the effort, her top has ridden up and reveals the word BITCH tattooed across the lower of her back.

‘I think her gentle and ladylike manner may also be a factor,’ he laughs gruffly. ‘Check out the sister.’

On the other side of the stage is a thin blonde wearing stiletto’s and a tiny, skin-tight dress. She’s beyond smug as she watches her sister’s rage.

‘It doesn’t matter. Cheating is a shit thing to do. If you’re not happy with someone just say. Turn around and leave instead of being a twat and destroying their lives.’

‘Chill, Little Witch. It’s trashy TV, with trashy people who want a few minutes of fame. That’s all. These people love the drama ’cos they ain’t got shit else goin’ on.’ He scoops up another handful of popcorn and shovels it into his mouth.

‘And why do you watch it?’ I ask. Our faces turn so we’re looking at each other. ‘You running low on drama?’

‘Nah,’ he laughs. ‘Drama I got plenty of. Everyday it’s life and death. Torture. Murder. Psychotic witch brothers or crazy witch fathers.’ He nods at me. ‘An unhinged, all-powerful girl that could kill us all if the mood struck her.’

‘I could if I had my magic,’ I mumble.

He points at the T.V. ‘This is normality. Or as close to normal as we’re ever gonna get. Plus, it’s funny shit.’

I notice a bottle of whiskey and an empty glass on the bedside table. He reaches around and hands me the bottle. I take a sip. Or four. And return my attention to the talk show. The smartly dressed host is building up the tension for the result reveal. I feel Hendrix watching me.

‘Spit it out.’

‘You’re a bit of a bitch. You know that?’ He grabs the glass from the cabinet and holds it out.

‘And you’re a vile, disgusting pig,’ I reply, filling the glass. He chuckles as I take another swig from the bottle as he sips his own drink. ‘So, let’s just carry on hating each other in silent disdain, and you can stop this weird attempt at trying to be friends with me. Deal?’

‘Our disdain is far from silent,’ he chortles, sipping his whiskey. ‘Everyone knows we don’t like each other. Hell, don’t take it personally. I don’t like anyone. And I ain’t trying to be ya friend neither.’

‘Then what the hell are you doing? The last few weeks you’ve stuck up for me, helped me train and generally been tolerable. I don’t get it.’

‘I want the Veil down.’ He shrugs. ‘And you’re the only one that can do it. And plus, you’re a tough cookie. I admire ya.’

I choke on my drink. ‘I’m sorry. Did you just say you admired me?’

‘Don’t get all wet between the legs. Not many chicks could go through what ya been through and still tell a man like Grayson to get bent. Or have men like Tobias and Theodore Kendryk run off into hiding. But you gotta get your head out ya arse.’

‘My head isn’t up my arse.’

‘You know how many people would die for me?’ he asks. He doesn’t give me the opportunity to share a smart remark. ‘None. I have no one that would die for me. I have no one who loves me. No one who likes me. And I’ve been alive for eight-hundred years.’

‘Maybe a shower would help with that.’

‘But you? You have men scrambling over themselves to have ya for their own.’

‘For my magic. Not me. There’s a hell of a difference. Except Gabriel... he loves me for... well, me.’ Now I feel a little guilty.

He laughs. Hard. 'If Grayson just wanted your magic he wouldn't give a shit about you and Gabriel. And if ya disobeyed him, he'd just slap ya in chains and torture ya till ya did what he wanted, without thinking twice. But he keeps forgiving ya and letting ya off. Hell, ya destroyed his house and he did nothing but give ya a little slap. If he didn't care about ya, he'd have served ya Amara's head by now and hacked your legs off so ya couldn't run away. But he didn't, cos he loves ya. And Tobias? The man has no soul. He literally doesn't care about anything. He stood over ya the other night and instead of killing ya or taking ya, he left a love letter. A weird one, but it was a love letter. And ya say that he killed that babe of yours because he had a vision of your death? That means he cares. With no soul. He cares for ya. And Gabriel? He's lost everything. His brothers. His position in the coven. He's sacrificed it all for ya, and ya turn him away like he's nothing.'

'Don't comment on things you don't understand. You sure as hell don't understand me or what I've been through with Grayson and Toby. And you sure as shit don't understand Gabriel and me.' I swig the whiskey too hard in my annoyance and it spills down my chin.

'Then tell me. Cos in my opinion, ya just turned your back on a man who has lost everything in the pursuit of loving ya.'

'Bullshit. That's bullshit. He's been with a woman who helped murder my child. He used her against me when we first met. The same as Toby did. Do you know how that feels?'

'No. I don't. But tell me, Lilly Hopper, do ya know what it feels like for him?' He raises his brow and watches me glare at him. 'Or don't ya give a shit?'

'What are you on about?'

'How do ya think Gabriel feels knowing not only that ya had sex with his brother, but that ya loved him? That ya loved Tobias Kendryk. Yes. He screwed Ava, a couple of times back in the day. Before he met ya. Ava was the equivalent of an old sock on a lonely night. And yes, technically he slept with her after you two got together over Christmas, but ya can't hold that against him, Little Witch. He only did that to save *you*. To protect *you*. He didn't want to. Believe me. That was all Grayson and in my opinion, it was a low thing to do to his own brother, and to you. But you... you *obsessed* over his brother. The little brother who betrayed him, stole the

journal, attempted to destroy the coven he loves, conspired against him and broke his heart. How do ya think Gabriel feels when he sees you naked?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘When he touches all those scars on your body?’

‘He doesn’t care about my scars.’

‘The ones that your uncle put there. Maybe. What about the scars that his brother put there? The scars that ya let him put there? That hand print on your inner thigh? The one that ya allowed him to mark ya with as a show of devotion? Do ya think it makes him hate ya? Resent ya? Do ya think he’s jealous of the time ya spent with Tobias? Do ya think that he loathes ya for being so in love with a cruel, sadistic man who spent years trying to destroy everything he loves?’

‘I... I err... Hang on. Who told you about that scar on my thigh?’

He shrugs. ‘Gabriel let it slip one night when he’d had too much to drink. Anyway, as I was sayin’, do ya think that when Gabriel hears ya say his little brother’s name in your sleep, he doesn’t care? That it doesn’t bother him? Or do ya think his heart breaks a little every time he thinks about what you and his brother did together? What ya had? Of what his brother did to ya? Look me in the eye and tell me that if Gabriel knew about how ya suffered, or about Ava’s part in what happened to ya, that he would have fucked her? Or would he have killed her?’

Killed her. I know that.

I drink more of the whiskey to dull down the overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame.

‘He’s ready to die for ya. Tobias will kill ya rather than lose ya to another man and Grayson will kill anyone who tries to take ya away from him and his coven. I would think twice about who ya spend your time and energy hating, cos out of the three, Gabriel is the only one who will see the world burn before he sees a tear slide down your cheek. Your past is exactly that, Little Witch. Gotta let it go. All ya have is today. Cos yesterday’s gone and tomorrow may never come. I’m sure ya would rather be rutting with the man ya love than sitting next to me watching this shit and getting drunk.’ He takes the whiskey

from my hand as I stare at him open mouthed. For a foul-mouthed monster, he sure seems to know what to say. 'Piss off then.'

I get to my feet a little dumbstruck and can't help but look back at him. He's returned his gaze to the television and is chuckling away to himself as the wife is screaming about shoving the test results down her husband's throat.

'Why are you being so nice to me?'

'Not being nice. Being honest. And like I said, I can see why he likes ya. You got spirit and balls. Now take both and fuck off. I'm watching my TV show.'



Walking down the hallway, I pass room after room. All are occupied with sleeping Nomads, either on the beds, on the floors, or propped up against the walls. Most are still dirty from the fight. Some have tried to scrub the soot, blood and ash off, but their exhaustion has clearly won out and sleep has taken priority. In another room are a couple of men on phones, looking very busy as they issue orders to unknown persons on the other end. I linger and watch the television they have on. A Nomad channel-surfs as he sits with his toe tapping on the tartan carpet. I expect they're waiting to see any mention of us - about the fire or the possibility of witches - but they're reporting on the birth of a baby royal at the minute, so that's a relief. I carry on and stop outside a single bedroom with a radio playing. A stream of whispered swear words, in a thick Irish accent, are spilling out into the hallway. Sitting at a desk, hunched over a computer, is Connor. His back is to me as he stares at the screen.

'Hey,' I say gently. He can be a little jumpy when he's focused on his work and sure enough, he jumps a mile, sending a mug of coffee all over the place. He snatches up the laptop to stop it getting ruined and steps back, hissing a curse word. 'Here, let me help you.' I head inside and grab a towel from the bathroom to mop up the mess. Meanwhile, he's relocated to the bed and is still staring intently at the screen. There's a massive bruise on the left side of his face, a gash across his nose and a split down his lip. It hurts my heart to see such a sweet and innocent guy so battered.

'My feckin' fingers are slowing me down,' he mutters angrily. Two

of his fingers are taped together but he still taps away at lightning speed. I tried to use Gabriel's laptop once – before Grayson confiscated it from us – and he was in hysterics at my attempts to type a simple sentence. I'd never used one before. Still haven't really.

'You okay?' I ask Connor, sitting on the bed beside him. 'You look like hell.'

'You looked in the mirror lately, girly?' he replies.

'I am so sorry. You never would have gotten hurt if it wasn't for-'

'You saved my life. You saved a lot of lives so don't even start apologising. I'm grand. I'll be even better when I figure this nonsense out. I am so confused. So feckin' confused. I'm tired and Grayson is on the war path and-'

'Breathe.' I manage to prize the laptop from the exhausted man. 'What's up? Why are you confused.'

'It's the ring,' he groans, throwing his hands up in the air. 'I don't get it!'

'What don't you get?'

In a single breath, he tells me, 'Well, Hendrix said he sold the ring to a bloke he thinks was called Ian Daniels. Or Liam Samuels. He's no too sure. 'Cos, he was half-cut when he sold it. I've only gone and found two men matching both those names in the area he sold it in. After a couple of hours, I discovered that Ian Daniels received a large sum of money from a pawn broker posing as an art dealer and then they received a large sum of money from a well to do family with an interest in the occult and then they filled a police report in regard to a theft and-'

'Okay. Okay, sweetie, stop.' I take his shoulders and look him in the eye. 'You need to breathe or you'll pass out.' He's sweating and blinking way too much. I'm sure his heart is hammering and every time he swallows he seems to struggle getting it down his throat. My hands take his and I give him a soothing smile. 'Tell me what you've found about the ring and its current location.'

'Which one?' He laughs in frustration. 'There are two.'

‘Two?’

‘Yeah. Two of the bloody things, look.’ He retakes the laptop and after a few taps on the keys, he shows me the screen. ‘See here? There’s one in a quirky little museum down in Cornwall. It’s basically a house that’s been renovated to showcase oddities and occult items. Mounted on the wall behind a red rope is a ring that matches the description of Rebecca’s wedding ring.’

‘And the second one?’

He exhales and after a few taps, he shows me exactly where it is. And it’s a place I know only in my dreams. A place I’ve always wanted to visit it. ‘The British Museum?’ I snatch the laptop and stare at the magnificent building with wonderment. I’ve longed to climb the steps up to the main doors. To stand beside those columns. To walk beneath the Great Court glass roof. To see the Egyptian antiquities on loan from the museum of Cairo. To see the Rosetta Stone with my own eyes. I’ve pored over images of them in books my entire life and longed to see them myself. Goddamn. It’s in the British museum for Christ sake!

But I won’t get my hopes up too much because I doubt I’ll be able to go there myself.

‘So, you’ve found two rings. We just need to go fetch them, right?’

‘You can’t just stroll up to the British museum and take their exhibits, Lilly. The place is guarded like Fort-Knox. The little museum in Cornwall? Well, that maybe we can do but-’

‘Listen.’ I lower the lid of the laptop and turn to face him. ‘Have you slept since we left The Orchard?’ He shakes his head. ‘Sleep then. You look ready to drop.’

‘But I need to tell Grayson-’

‘I’ll tell Grayson. He’s downstairs with Gabriel and I need to do some damage control with my other half, so I can tell him where the rings are and he can organise getting them. Okay?’

‘Hold on... Other half?’

‘Erm...’

'It's okay,' he says, nudging me playfully. 'I've known about you two for a while. I walked in on yer sucking face a few months back but left before yer saw me.'

As he chuckles away to himself, I get to my feet. 'I'll tell Grayson about the rings and that you're asleep. Hopefully he'll leave you be for the rest of the night. Oh. And keep the fact that you know about Gabriel and I being together under your hat, would you? It's supposed to be a secret.'

'Why?'

'I'll give you a clue. He has dark eyes. A vile temper and a slightly possessive attitude regarding the last Arcane Witch alive.'

'Huh. Yeah sounds about right.' He nods and falls sideways on the bed with a moan. By the time I reach the door, I'm pretty sure he's asleep.



I find both Grayson and Gabriel down in the bar. A dank and musty little place with an elderly sleeping barman propped up on a stool behind the beer taps. Gabriel's leaning across the bar and helping himself to a bottle of whiskey. I watch him start to pour himself a large glass before giving up and drinking straight from the bottle. After a few good gulps, he slumps forward with a groan and throws his arms over his head.

'Fucking good job, Gabriel. Well-fucking-done,' he scorns himself. 'She's never going to talk to you again.'

Grayson is on the phone walking back and forth by the door. His free hand is in his pocket and he talks tiredly to whoever is on the other line. I overhear him. The gist is that they can't locate Ava and no one seems to know where she's gone.

Great.

He spots me lingering and glances between his brother and me. His pacing slows as he waits to see exactly what I'm doing down here. As I pass, I tell him what Connor has found and that he's fallen asleep

through exhaustion. I recommend he leaves him be, that he's no good to anyone without rest. He nods and carries on talking to whoever is on the other end of the phone, dismissing me with a wave of his hand. I head over to Gabriel, who is still muttering to himself angrily. My hand rests on his head and I start running my fingers through his hair. His whole body relaxes at my touch. Without lifting his head, he pulls me in so he can bury his face in my shoulder.

'I'm so sorry,' he mumbles, his lips pressed close to my skin. 'She's gone. I can't even kill her for you I'm that useless.'

'We'll find her. We'll find Toby, and Theo, and Jensen. They'll all get what they deserve. I don't care about them right now. I care about us. About you.'

'You still care about us? Me?'

'Our past is our past. I forgive you for yours if you forgive me for mine. Deal?'

He nods but doesn't say a word. His hands tighten their hold on me, like he's scared to let me go in case I leave and never come back. I lift his head and press my lips onto his. When he tries to pull away to talk, I pull him back in and refuse to give him the chance to. We're done talking. Well, there's only one thing I want to say.

'I absofuckinglutely love you. And I will never stop loving you. Never. Today is all that matters and today I have never loved you more.' I say through our pressed lips. That does it. His embrace becomes desperate and hungry. He's all hands and tongue. As am I! Before I know it, we've crashed into a quiet room where there are two pool tables and a dartboard on the wall. Gabriel kicks the door closed and lifts me onto one of the tables. My clothes are off in a second and his jeans are dropped round his ankles before we start making love.

I think of what Hendrix said about the scars that mark my body. About how they affect him. But he certainly doesn't seem to be thinking of them now. I've never seen such want and desire in another's eyes as I do when he looks at me. He never stops caressing my skin. He feels all of me and I'm not the only one that erupts in goose bumps as his skin glides over mine. We're clinging onto each other like there's no tomorrow.

Who knows... There may not be! Not for us.

Not for any of us.

Gabriel's mumbling and talking in whispers. I stretch my hand across the bed and find it empty. When I open my eyes, a small sliver of light is sneaking in through the door. Gabriel is standing in the hallway quietly talking to someone. Grayson. Obviously. They wander down the hall and curiosity gets the better of me. I'm on my feet and following them. I come to the room where the Nomads were watching television earlier in the evening. Now the room is crammed with people, but no one says a word. I weave between the silent men until I see what has them all stunned into silence.

It's the news, but they're not reporting on the newest addition of the royal family. They're reporting on me. Well, my fire at least. Video footage of the mansion and the vibrant red blaze is being intercut with footage of the red lightning striking me. It's been filmed at a distance but the image is clear. You can't see my face. But it's obvious it's a girl and that the events are far from human.

'Oh my god...' My involuntary gasp has everyone turning to face me. Gabriel leaves the television and heads towards me.

'I don't want you to panic,' he says, like that will help me to remain calm. 'It's going to be okay.'

'I'm on the news! I can't believe it. This is terrible. W-what do we do?'

'Boss?' Billy enters the room with an armful of newspapers. 'We have another problem. A big problem.'

As he passes, I take the top one in my hand and see an enormous picture of the red flames rising from The Orchard with the words, "*Witches are back!*" sprawled across it. Another paper shows the lightning hitting me and streaming out to the mass of Traitors below. It's a silhouette at best. The words read, "*Witch kills dozens of humans in terror attack!*" It's crystal clear that what is on these pages is magical in nature. And it's out for the world to see. 'This is a lie. There were no humans. They were Traitors and they were trying to kill us!'

'It doesn't matter.' Grayson shrugs, taking the paper from my hands and looking at it for himself. 'They are announcing to the world that we are back and that we are a threat to every person on the planet.'

'I'm sorry, Boss,' Billy clears his throat and holds out his full arms. 'That's not the problem I was talking about.'

'What is?' Grayson reaches over and takes another paper. He goes a ghostly white as he stares at the front page, then slowly, he turns it to

us. I'm looking at three enormous photographs that fill the entire front page. Photographs of Collins, Grayson and Gabriel. Across the bottom are the words *"Witches are here. And these are their faces"*.

'They must have tracked you down through ownership of the house. Business records. Bank accounts,' Billy says. At that moment, their faces appear on the television. Along with their full names, the businesses that they are associated with, and every known address they have. 'Your faces are everywhere.'

'And hers?' Gabriel asks.

'Not as of yet, sir,' Billy replies.

My voice is a weak whisper. 'This is bad. Really bad.'

'Yes. It is. We must get a move on.' Grayson folds up the paper and tosses it to the floor. 'The news broke a couple of hours ago. Most of England hasn't woken up yet so we need to get to this little oddity museum in Cornwall as soon as possible. Before everyone in England knows our faces and they get organised.'

'Who gets organised?'

'Hunters. Police. Civilians. You name it. Doesn't matter really. They all want us dead and buried. We need to get to the oddity museum before it becomes a target. Get everything packed and ready to go.'

'A target?' I ask, as the Nomads start to scatter and prepare.

'The phrase, witch-hunt, is really very accurate,' Grayson sighs, pinching the ridge of his nose and shaking away the exhaustion he is clearly feeling. I doubt he's got any sleep. 'When the country wakes up to these headlines, they're going to be looking for us. Or anyone they think may be like us. And to do that they'll head to places they think we may be. A strange little house which is showcasing occult items will be on their list. Trust me. We need to get to it before the men with torches do.'

'People aren't like that anymore. They might think this is all a hoax.' I hear the denial in my voice and want to slap myself for it. Grayson's eye-roll will just have to do instead.

Billy's phone rings. After a few seconds of conversation, he informs the rest of us solemnly, 'The Hunters are already gathering, sir.' The whole room stills and you can feel the dread build in the air. I swallow a lump and Gabriel slides his hand into mine.

'What's your intel?' Gabriel demands.

'Our intel is that the French, Russian and some of the US Hunter Sanctums are preparing their men to leave for England in a matter of hours.'

'Since the sighting of magic was here, they'll be flocking in from all over the world with the intention of crushing not only us, but the idea that we could even return. What of the UK?'

The television stars emanating a high-pitched tone. We all turn to

watch as the screen turns blue. The image of a stake surrounded by flames is embossed in the background. The tone stops, followed by some static. Then, a plain, faceless white-mask appears on the screen.

'This is not a test,' says a deep, automated voice. 'This is an emergency broadcast system. A report of magic has been received by your government, and verified by the Witch-Hunter association.'

'Oh shit...' Gabriel whispers.

'A curfew has been implemented. No civilians are permitted outside after eight pm. This is for your own safety. If you have concerns regarding the intentions of someone you know, call two-two-two, and report your concerns. If you see these men...' The same photographs from the newspaper appear on the screen. 'Call two-two-two.' The mask returns. 'You are encouraged to protect yourselves. Weapons, such as pepper-spray, monkey-fists, and bean-bag guns, are available for purchase and highly encouraged. Protect your families. Serve humanity. And most importantly... do not fear. The Witch Hunters are here.'

The image flickers, and then the whole message starts again.

After the third time, Gabriel clears his throat and turns off the sound.

'Pack up and be ready to leave within the hour. We need to move.'

The room empties of all except Gabriel, Grayson and I. Grayson slumps heavily into a small armchair and only now do I see how forlorn and tired he is. There are bags under his eyes and worry in his usually determined features.

'We can't go out into the world. Not now Hunters are coming *and* our faces are out for all to see.' Grayson says, looking defeated. 'They're selling weapons. Christ.'

'Let's just... forget them. Forget Hunters for a moment,' I blurt out, which makes them both raise their brow. Sometimes it's so painfully obvious they're brothers. They share so many mannerisms. 'They're coming. We knew they would. So we need to get a move on and keep our focus. There are two rings. One is fake but the other isn't and we need to get our hands on them both as soon as possible. Which one is closest?' It suddenly strikes me that I have no idea where the hell we are right now.

'The little oddity museum. It's about a two-hour drive from here,' Gabriel replies.

'Great. Then we head there. I'll go in as a tourist, have a look around and pick my moment to snatch the ring. Then we'll head straight to London and get the other one.'

Grayson starts to laugh. I don't miss the clear condescension. 'Why the hell would I send you in alone to fetch the ring.'

'Because our faces are all over the news,' Gabriel quips.

'I'll send a Nomad.'

‘Oh. Is there one you trust enough to fetch it for you? Considering we haven’t even told them about the ring or the necklace yet because we still can’t be a hundred percent positive they’re loyal to us.’ I love that he’s sticking up for my plan. I love that he knows the reasons behind my plan and that he trusts them because he’s absolutely right. There is no one else trustworthy enough to do this alone.

‘I’ll go and wear a disguise,’ Grayson shrugs.

‘What, like a pair of glasses? Don’t be ridiculous,’ I scoff.

‘Watch yourself,’ he scorns.

‘Need I remind you that if any one of you dies, you all die. Who will look after the Nomads then? Hmm? Who will help me bring down the Veil?’

He gets to his feet, and he shows me something I’ve not seen from him before. Panic. But it’s masked well with fury. A trait both brothers share. ‘You are not walking into a place where you could be taken from us by Hunters. You think you know pain, Miss Hooper. Trust me. You do not.’

‘Tell me, if we lost you three, how many of our people would be slaughtered? I can’t protect them. I don’t even know where the Nomad camps are! I can’t access my magic, Grayson. Not without you. And we know that Theo, Jensen and Toby have people in your organisation feeding information through. He knew about the brand. Someone must have told him! You have to start trusting me and believing that I can help you. I can get in there and I can find my ancestors ring. I’ll get it. No matter what, I’ll get it.’

‘And if Hunters are at this museum and see you, they’ll snatch you up. They have the mark. The mark that burns hot when near magic. They will sense you. They will catch you. And they will kill you.’

‘Then let her have her magic when she goes in there. She’ll be able to protect herself,’ Gabriel argues.

‘No way. She’ll run.’

‘You have the Bloodstone. Even if I did run, you would find me and probably kill Amara. Plus, Gabriel will be with you. No way I leave him behind.’

‘You could die. The answer is no,’ he says through clenched teeth.

‘Have you forgotten the war?’ Gabriel hisses at him out of sheer frustration. ‘Have you forgotten the sound of innocents being slaughtered in the streets? Of children screaming as their mother’s throats were slit. As Hunters raided our homes, raping, killing and torturing everyone they could lay their hands on? Because I haven’t. We saw them cover children in oil and set them on fire. I still smell them burning! Their cries haunt my dreams. And it’s pretty damn obvious their hatred of us hasn’t lessened.’ There are tears in his eyes and a harrowing agony that causes mine to brim too. ‘I will not let

that happen again. Our priority is completing the spell before the Hunters locate us. Every day we wait, more Hunters come. More of us will die. We simply don't have the time to waste. Not now they know we are alive and who we are.' He nods to the television still playing the public service announcement. 'The word is out that the witches are back. Our faces are everywhere. And everyone is coming for us. We made a vow to save our people. If you choose to keep hiding, Grayson, you are simply choosing to die. You are choosing for us all to die. And I'm not ready to leave this world yet. Not now I have someone worth living in it for. So, let her do what she needs to do.'

'Like I said, she is not going in alone!'

'I'll take her,' Hendrix offers, as he appears in the doorway. 'I'll go with her and keep her safe. And in line. And if the shit does hit the fan, she can use her magic to get us out.'

'You have jet black eyes and razor-sharp teeth,' I tell him. 'You'll stick out like a sore thumb.'

Hendrix pulls out a dark pair of sunglasses and puts them on. 'Ta-fucking-da.'

'What about your teeth?'

'I just won't bite anyone.' He shrugs, returning his sunglasses to his pocket. He turns his attention to Grayson. 'I want the Veil down as much as you. I've been a loyal and obedient soldier to you for five centuries. I'll look after her and get that ring, or die trying. Gabriel is right. Our time of hiding is done. It really is now or never, Boss.'

We all watch Grayson. Gabriel's hand is almost crushing mine as we wait. I see his brother's mind racing with the what ifs. But then finally, Grayson gives a small, single nod.

'Let's go and get the rings.'

The rain has turned to sleet. My legs buckled hours ago. I'm on my knees, inches deep in the mud and sinking further and further as every moment passes. My hair is plastered to my face. My skin is in agony as the thin ice pelts down hard on my naked body. I slump over. And Uncle Harry showers me with the hose once more. He doesn't stop until I get back up on my knees. My teeth chatter hard. I've been shivering for so long, my muscles ache.

He's wrapped up in his thick coat with a scotch in his hand, laughing from his belly as he watches me. I scratch at the thick rope around my neck, hating that the wetter it becomes, the more it smells of dog.

The sun is setting. The porch light is turned on as Christa brings out a plate of beef hotpot. Harry sits on a rocking chair and watches me shiver.

I'm tied to the post where his dogs are tethered when they misbehave.

'You want to behave like a feral bitch?' Harry calls over, laughing as he does. He throws a chunk of meat at me. It lands in the mud but within reach. My stomach screams in desperation. I haven't eaten in two days.

Not a thing. I'm being punished. I ate some of the left-over Christmas dinner from the fridge. I look up at Harry through my rain soaked lashes as he watches me with a smirk. It grows when I reach over and scoop up the mud-soaked meat.

'That's it, girl. Eat my scraps.'

I hurl it into the bushes and resume my position. My insides cramp at the loss of the slightest bit of sustenance.

But I would rather die out here. Starved. Naked. Cold. Than let him see me bend to his will. I lay my palms down flat on my thighs and let the icy water continue to hammer hard against my skin. Not once looking away from him.

It's only temporary, after all. The rain will either stop. Harry will get bored and let me go.

Or I'll die.

*'It's just temporary,' I tell myself.
Just like Toby's been teaching me.*

'Lilly?' Grayson gives me a gentle shake awake. I flinch and slap his hand away from me, startled by the mixture of my dream and his touch.

'Don't touch me, Grayson,' I warn. 'Keep your hands to yourself.'

'Alright. Calm down. It seemed like you were having a nightmare. Thought I'd spare you.' He returns his hand to the steering wheel. I

glance back at the series of cars following us. The one directly behind has Gabriel and Hendrix. Grayson wouldn't let him drive to the house in the same car as me and rather than be forced to talk to him, I closed my eyes to rest. I must have fallen asleep.

He hands me a cereal bar from the driver side door. 'Your stomach's been growling like you are harboring some kind of beast in your belly. You should eat.'

I take the bar, roll down the window, and toss it out.

'Last time I accepted something from you, I ended up branded.' I pull my jacket tighter around my body and continue looking out the window. 'I'd rather be hungry than accept anything you offer me.'

'Fine.' He shrugs and puts more pressure on the accelerator. 'Be hungry. God, I hate your spiteful streak.'

'And I hate everything about you.' I add in a quiet mumble.

'Sorry?'

'Nothing.'

After another half an hour or so, we park up in a small, but busy, little town. The back-passenger door opens and Gabriel slides in. He forces himself between the two seats and we share a chaste little kiss.

'You alright, Beautiful?'

'Fine. You?'

'All good.' He turns to Grayson and asks, 'Did you see them?'

'Yes. I saw them,' he mutters angrily, referring to the small group of people we passed a few moments ago, shouting and waving signs outside the house I'm assuming is the converted museum. The slogans varied from "*Magic is no joke!*" to a more direct concept.

"Death to Witches!"

'They really hate us, don't they?'

'Yep,' Gabriel replies plainly. 'I called ahead and the owners are still opening up today. But he thinks that by tomorrow he'll be shut down by the authorities. I expect Hunters will descend on him soon enough and confiscate what he has. That newspaper stuff has really riled everybody up.'

Grayson remains quiet. His hands grip the steering wheel so hard, his knuckles are white. His mouth is in a tight line as Gabriel watches him nervously.

'Keep your head,' he tells him calmly.

'My head is kept. Believe me. Or those people would be on the floor writhing in agony,' Grayson replies.

'It's just a couple of people with some silly signs,' I offer. Stupidly.

'And Hitler was just one man with an idea. Look what he achieved. These people, much like you, Miss Hooper, have no idea what one word can do when said at the right time to the right person. None. If my grandfather hadn't refused to help that pathetic little human-king

fight his stupid war over in the East, he wouldn't have sought out that god forsaken man, Richards. And the war between humans and witches would probably never have started.'

'Richards?' I ask.

'Timothy Richards,' Gabriel mutters, like the name is a dirty word. 'He started the Hunter program. By order of the king, of course. The king knew we would never follow his rule. Or any human-kings rule. So, he decided to destroy us instead. He ordered the capture of thousands of human children and forced them into training, under the command of Richards. Ten years later, they attacked, and the war began.'

'You see these people?' Grayson asks me, pointing over at the group of protesters. 'Screaming for the murder of thousands of innocent people? They did this at the executions all those years ago. The crowds cheering as Hunters led out their victims. They killed most the men when they raided the villages. It was the women and children they bound and dragged through the mobs.' His hands start to shake and there is a slight tremble to his voice. 'And they *always* killed the children first.'

'Why?' I ask.

'So their parents had to watch,' Gabriel answers sadly.

'Holy-hell. That's barbaric. But... People aren't like that now. They wouldn't stand by and watch.'

'Yes, they would. And of all people, you should know that. All those staff in your uncle's house, how many helped you?' He shakes his head and scoffs at his own memories. 'We thought that the villagers would defend us. Protect us. Most of them had benefited from our magic in some way. But when the time came, they stood in those crowds and cheered with everybody else, watching the torture and murder of the people they once called friends.' Grayson's eyes brim with tears, but there's such hatred in the rest of him. 'You couldn't hear the agonised screams of the mothers as they watched their babies suffer and die over all the applauding and cheering,' he spits hatefully. 'Watching them being chained up in those tanks and drowned. Watching them tied to stakes and burnt. I'll never forget it and I will never forgive it. These fools don't understand what they are calling for.' He's descending into a hateful and furious pit full of pain and suffering. As he speaks, I know he's seeing those images behind his eyes. Memories that forged him into the monster that he is today. I couldn't imagine it. Watching all those people die. Screaming. Drowning. Burning. Choking. All in front of a mob, cheering and applauding. I rest my hand on Grayson's shoulder and he stops his ranting. He blinks his tears away and takes a long, deep breath.

'Then it's a good thing you found me, huh? I'll bring down the Veil

and we won't let that happen again. I promise.'

He taps my hand and nods, pulling himself back together. 'First things first,' Grayson says, undoing his seat belt and switching off the engine. 'We find the ring. Do not use your magic unless there is absolutely no other way. You keep the lowest of profiles.'

He pulls up his hood, slides on some sunglasses and gets out, slamming the door shut and not giving us a chance to say a word. He's embarrassed I think. That he let his emotions get the better of him.

Gabriel leans into me. 'That was a nice thing you did. Comforting Grayson like that. Much more than he deserves.'

'Well, I didn't want him to leap out the car and start killing them. It's weird to see him so emotional. When he talks about the war, it's almost like he's got a heart.'

'A lot happened to us in the war,' Gabriel sighs, glancing out the window to his brother who's talking to Billy and Hendrix. 'A lot happened to Grayson. He lost a lot. Which is why I guess I forgave so much of his cruelty.'

'He's guilty of a lot of cruelty,' I add with a raised brow. 'You're a bigger person than me to have forgiven any of it.'

'Grayson was married once,' he says, still glancing out the window. *What?!*

'They were kids. Barely fifteen when they tied the knot. Mother disapproved of her. She was human.'

'She was a what? Grayson Kendryk... Married a human!'

'Oh yeah. But her spirit was so wiccan. She was wild. Always getting in trouble. Always playing with the boys instead of stitching or learning her etiquette.' He laughs fondly as I sit mouth-open. 'Grayson was besotted with her. Always running after her. Trying to keep up. She was better at everything. A better swimmer. A better archer. A better swordswoman. God, she was just this ball of energy.' He looks back at me. 'Just like you. So much like you.'

'What happened?' I dare to ask. That smile soon slips.

'What do you think?' He takes my hand. 'He lost her. In the war. He lost both her and their daughter during the war.' He kisses my knuckles and rests his hand on my cheek. Like the idea of losing me is too much to bear. 'The day they died. The day they were murdered, we were there. In the crowd. In one of the cages, awaiting our turn to be executed. Timothy Richards, the sadistic bastard, had us up front to watch. He wanted Grayson to see them die.'

'Why such cruelty?'

'Because it was Timothy Richards' daughter Grayson had married.'

'Bloody hell! Richards killed his own daughter? His own grandchild?'

He nods. 'Bias and Theo disrupted the execution. But not soon

enough. Grayson's wife and child died by the time they got to us. You know? I still have nightmares about that day? About the scream Grayson produced when they died? It was...' His eyes go vacant and his skin turns pale. 'So much pain, Lilly. So much fear and sorrow. So much hatred, all poured into that one, single scream. The crowd cheered as his wife and baby girl were killed. She was two, Lilly. Two! How could anyone... Why would... They just...' I can't take the horror etched on his features as he relives the memories, searching them for a single reason why, or how, anyone could do such a thing. I squeeze his hand and gently guide his attention back to me. He blinks and returns. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk about such things in front of you. Not after what you went through.'

'You can. Your pain is mine. And mine is yours. We share so we don't suffer alone. Go on.'

'Grayson disappeared right then and there. The Grayson I knew at any rate. I would say he Broke. But he didn't. He just... died. Inside. I think that when he met you, the spark he felt for his wife all those years ago flickered again. He never looked at another woman after she died. In all those centuries. He barely looked at anyone, truth be told. Until you. But he's still cruel and heartless. The two boys I grew up with? My brothers? They're gone. One died in the Hunters cells. The other died when the Hunters murdered his family right in front of him. Hunters took everything from us. But I no longer forgive either of my brother's wickedness. Because there's nothing in those men that I love anymore. My brothers are gone. And Grayson's wife would be ashamed of him now. She wouldn't recognise him at all. The boys I loved growing up? They aren't coming back.'

'What was her name?' I ask.

'Arianna,' he replies. 'And his little girl was Tilly.'

'Poor guy,' I whisper. 'No wonder he's so twisted. But that still doesn't excuse what he's done. After all, he had a son and let him die too when he tried to get his magic to manifest.'

'Agreed.' He takes my chin in his hand and shows me that stunning smile of his. 'Okay. Are you ready?'

'As I'll ever be.'

We join the others outside. Hendrix is leaning against his car with his dark shades on watching a group of girls walk past. After a few minutes of reaffirming the plan, Hendrix and I head into the town, leaving them behind.

I think about what Gabriel shared with me. Does knowing the pain that lies in Grayson's past excuse the man he is now?

No.

But at least I understand a little more. I don't forgive his actions. Past or present. But I understand. After all, I killed several men after

my child was taken from me. But I would never do what he has done. What he did to Rose Hooper and to the boy they conceived together. To me. To Gabriel.

Whoever he was when he loved Arianna, he isn't that man anymore.

Now, he's a monster.

And as my uncle always said.

"Monsters get what they deserve".

And Grayson will get what he deserves.

With my mouth and nose buried in the collar of the leather jacket Gabriel put on me, Hendrix and I both head into town.

‘You’re so fucking weird,’ Hendrix comments. ‘Always smelling that man’s clothes and skin. It ain’t normal.’

‘He smells like home.’

‘A person ain’t a home.’

‘The right person is. The right person is everything. One day, maybe you’ll understand.’

He gives a snort. ‘Doubtful. Not until I can make more of my kind at any rate. Ready?’ He adjusts his sunglasses and faces forwards.

‘So, Ava’s gone? No one knows where she went?’

‘Ya serious?’ Hendrix asks as we walk. ‘Look, Little Witch. Just focus on getting us the ring and forget Lurpak for now. We’ll track her down.’

‘Lurpak?’

‘Yeah.’ He shrugs. ‘It’s what some of the fellas at the camp call her. Ya know? Butter that’s easily spread... Like her legs.’ He laughs hard at his offensive joke. ‘Oh, lighten up would ya? I get that we’re about to walk through a group of witch-hating nut jobs and that the woman who has tried to ruin your life has done a runner, but how about ya take a second and look around, yeah?’ He takes hold of my elbow and makes me stop. ‘Look! No walls. No Grayson telling ya what to do. You’re in the world. Surrounded by people. Look.’ He nods to a small dog tied up outside a shop. ‘Ever seen a Chihuahua before?’ He points to a street performer. ‘What about a juggler? Or a busker? Hell, Little Witch... You ever even had a cup of coffee from a coffee shop before?’ He swerves off to the side and heads towards a little kiosk, pulling me close behind him. When he orders me a latte and a giant pretzel, I don’t know what has me more dumbstruck. The fact that I’m out in

the world after a whole life of being locked away behind closed doors, or that it's Hendrix forcing me to enjoy myself.

Hendrix!

We watch the busker play his guitar as I stuff my face with the fresh pretzel and drink my first latte. I watch the shoppers pass by with their bags and listen to their inane chatter about the most mundane of problems, and it's beautiful. It's just everyday life with innocent and normal people. But then we turn our attention to the museum, the crowd we pass are anything but mundane. They yell and holler about the Devil and damnation. Signs condemning my people to death are waved in my face as Hendrix keeps me close. My heart is hammering hard against my chest, and when a man grabs my elbow to try and stop me from going inside, I freeze up, the same as I always do when unwanted hands hold me.

Hendrix grips the man's wrist hard.

'Touch her again, I'll snap it off,' he growls, pushing him away. The man stumbles back with his mouth agape, clutching his hand. Hendrix takes my elbow. 'Ya alright? Did he hurt ya?' I shake my head. 'C'mon. We need to get inside,' he mutters, guiding me towards the door. 'I have a feeling that prick saw my teeth.'

As soon as we're inside and the doors are closed, I feel like I can breathe again.

'I am so, so sorry.' A woman rushes towards us dressed in a long tie-dye skirt and a floral baggy top with heavy, draping sleeves. She's adorned with beads, bracelets and rings, and her hair is a big pile of curls on top of her head. She's bright red in the face and clearly in a flap. 'Those people out there are completely bonkers,' she pants, her eyes going to the front door and watching it anxiously as the crowd outside continue to hurl abuse and threats. 'There were only three out there when I arrived this morning.'

'Well, there are a fair few more than that now,' I tell her, rubbing my elbow. I can still feel where he grabbed me. 'I'm not too sure you should stay here. I don't think it's very safe.'

'I know. My son said the same thing this morning when he saw the papers. And then again when that public service announcement started. It's been on non-stop. You would have thought that with all

the acceptance of sexuality, cultures, race and religion we've experienced over the last few years, people would be a little more open minded. Anyway. What can I help you with?'

There's a loud pounding on the door from outside and someone starts yelling threats. Hendrix slides over the bolt, locking us in.

'We called earlier,' Hendrix grunts bluntly and impatiently. 'We were expecting to meet a man. Chris Foster.'

'Yes. Yes of course. You spoke to my son, but he has to work elsewhere today. You... are the lecturer?' She points to Hendrix who nods. 'So, you must be his student, yes?' She adds to me. I nod too. She looks at the old wooden staircase behind her. There are signs pointing upwards and I'm guessing that the museum is up the rickety flight of stairs. I myself glance up to Hendrix and think... lecturer of what? He looks like a bear wearing clothes.

'Well, you are more than welcome here. Please head on up and have a look around. I've been assured that the protestors can't come inside without being arrested, so they can do nothing more than shout at us. I will be up shortly to help you if needed.'

'We'll be fine.' Hendrix nudges me towards the flight of stairs. The woman scurries past us and disappears in her office, sniffing and muttering her "oh dears".

'We need to hurry. Only a matter of time before the police turn up. Or worse.'

I nod and we rush up the stairs.

'Fuck-me...' Hendrix murmurs as we reach the top of the stair case. 'This is...'

'Creepy. I think the word you're looking for, Hendrix, is creepy.'

The floorboards creak as we head in. So much so, I wonder if Hendrix and his heavy frame will crash through the floor and land on the owner's head. The walls are painted black and the only light comes from dozens and dozens of lit candles. There's an open fire, roaring in the far corner, and no windows or natural light at all. It's stifling and claustrophobic. The walls are lined with shelves and glass cabinets housing human skulls, rabbit's feet, scrolls, statues, herbs and

potions. All of which, apparently, have magical properties. Mannequins showcase wiccan robes. The tree branches nailed to the wall look like broomsticks or wands, and somewhere is some eerie chanting playing through old, tinny speakers. Slowly and a little in awe of the place, we walk through the room. My eyes scan it all. It's fascinating, but very weird.

‘Does any of this stuff actually have magical properties?’ I ask Hendrix.

‘This junk?’ he scoffs. ‘Nah. Most of the real stuff was destroyed by Hunters centuries ago and the rest were either lost or hidden by survivors. These things?’ He gestures to the wands on the wall. ‘They’re just sticks. Magic ain’t in stuff, Little Witch. It’s in blood.’ His lips curl up in a grim smile at the word and he even licks his lips. ‘It’s all about the blood. That’s where magic really lives. The Bloodstone? Your brand? All of it was made with your blood. Otherwise, the Bloodstone would just be a pretty rock and the mark on your arm would just be a burn. Blood is the source of the power you lot have. And it’s the source of life for my kind. To share blood, that’s real power.’

‘What happens if you can’t drink blood?’ I ask. ‘I’ve always wondered.’

‘We dry out and turn into shriveled up corpses. That’s what. We don’t die either. We become trapped in mummified tombs of our own flesh.’

‘And how do you make more of your kind?’

‘I bite them, and they drink my blood. You see these?’ He flashes me his teeth. ‘When I bite someone, a small bit of poison from my fangs seeps into their blood. It’s harmless until it mixes with mine. Then they turn. Well, they would if the Veil was down. No magic? No turning.’

‘So... Without your teeth and without magic, you can’t make more of your kind? That’s interesting. I wonder what it’s like to be a living corpse,’ I ponder.

He narrows his eyes and then swiftly changes the subject. ‘Let’s see what’s over there.’

As we turn a corner, we come across a sight that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Torture devices.

Rusty and brutal looking contraptions which were used as a means of getting confessions or proof of guilt from a suspected witch. Dunking chairs and face masks covered in spikes. Thumb screws and long iron needles called *prickers*. And then, standing in pride of place, adorned with twigs, is a giant stake.

‘I really don’t like this place,’ I whisper.

‘Then let’s find this bloody ring and get gone, hmm?’ Hendrix turns and continues walking through the halls. We finally come to a wall, mounted with jewelry and trinkets. There are talismans and crowns made of bone, as well as a mannequin’s hand pinned to the wall. On each of its fingers are rings, and on the very middle finger, sparkling and ruby red, is Rebecca Hooper’s wedding ring.

‘There it is,’ I whisper to Hendrix, who’s stopped beside me. I nod in the ring’s direction. It’s even more beautiful than I imagined and far more detailed than any painting could show. The band is made of emerald green leaves knotting around each other, and the red ruby is held in a golden setting. But right in the centre of the heart shaped ruby is a seven-pointed, diamond set star. The hand isn’t behind anything more than a red velvet rope.

Hendrix’s phone starts to ring. He’s quick to answer it, greeting the caller as “Boss”. He nods and grunts a few times before telling Grayson that we’ve located the ring. But then whatever Grayson has to say next has Hendrix swearing. As he hangs up and sighs, I feel my magic come to me in a glorious wave. Which can only mean one thing.

‘Trouble?’ I ask.

He nods. ‘Trouble.’

‘What’s coming?’

‘About thirty teenagers with bats, bottles of spirits and lighters. Got a mob inbound and they’re gunning for this place hard, according to Grayson. You got your mojo?’

‘Grayson’s given me access to my magic, yes.’

I turn and reach out for the ring. Before my fingers get anywhere close, we hear a crash and a scream from down stairs. We both turn to look at the hallway leading back to the staircase where the owner is still screeching. Then we smell smoke. I reach out and slide the ring on my own finger before we turn and run towards the commotion. The owner is already up the stairs. Thick, black smoke follows her. Then, Hendrix’s phone rings again. He picks it up.

‘Yeah?’ he grunts.

‘They’ve set my house on fire!’ The owner cries between coughing and gasping. ‘The whole downstairs is ablaze!’

‘Yeah, Boss. We know they’ve set the house on fire,’ Hendrix sighs. ‘We gotta go. Why? Because the bloody house is on fire! That’s why!’ He hangs up without another word.

‘Where are your fire extinguishers?’ I ask. But she shakes her head. She doesn’t have any? Fantastic.

‘Got another way out?’ Hendrix asks the hysterical woman. She just wails and shakes. ‘A back door? A window?’ She gives a short sharp shake of her head. ‘So just the front door?’ She nods. ‘Great.’

‘I can blast a hole in the wall?’ I offer. ‘You could jump down with us? Or I could-’

‘You’re not to use your...’ He glances at the woman who is in utter hysterics. ‘You-know-what, unless we got no other way to survive. This is just a little fire.’ There’s a big bang and the stairs collapse in a sudden inferno. Flames lick at the walls and the exhibits made of old, dried wood, quickly helps the fire to spread. ‘There’s gotta be another way out.’

‘I’ll put the flames out. Easy.’ I raise my hand, ready to take control of the blaze. But he takes hold of my wrist and shakes his head.

‘There are dozens of people watching this place. Ya start messing about with the fire, we’ll have Hunters here instead of a few rowdy teenagers. And they saw your face, remember? Last thing we need is your mug-shot all over the television. We need to get out of here on

the quiet.'

'They know we're in here!' I argue. 'The bastards set this place on fire with people inside.'

'We ain't people in their eyes. We're either witches or witch sympathisers. Oh, for fuck's sake...' He turns to the woman, who is now on the floor, howling like an animal. 'Will ya shut up? I can't hear myself think with ya wailing like that.'

She doesn't listen. I don't think she can hear us. In her mind, she's going to die here. I guess that's enough to make anyone lose their mind to grief and panic. I kneel down beside her, rest my hands on her shoulders and channel my magic. I feel my eyes change. I feel the power come when I call it and I know that I can control it.

'Stop crying,' I order. Her face falls still and her sobbing stops immediately. 'Tell us, is there a way out of here that isn't on fire?'

'O-other than the front door, the only other exit is through the cellar in my office. There's an old tunnel that leads out to the back of the carpark across the road, but it was flooded a few months back and its caved in,' she snuffles.

Hendrix's pocket is ringing again but he chooses to ignore it. I'm on my feet with a plan. 'Okay. So, we go down to the cellar and through the tunnel. I'll unblock it and we can get out unseen across the road. What do you say?' I ask Hendrix. He shrugs as if there's nothing better to do. 'Great.' I look down to the woman. 'Go to sleep.' Her eyes roll into the back of her head and she slumps on her side. 'Hendrix, grab the weirdo.'

'Why? Just leave her.'

I turn to him, my eyes as black as his and I go to open my mouth. But he beats me to it. 'Alright. Alright. Keep your hair on. I've got the freaky chic. No need to go all Darren Brown on me.' He scoops her up as I clap my hands together excitedly. I love testing the limits of my power. I send out a surge of my Telekinetic magic to the floor, blasting a hole through it big enough for us to fit through. Thick smoke and hot flames pour upwards. I get it under control easily enough, quelling the fire and pushing it back down and out of my way. The closer I get, the more it disappears. We stand by the edge of the hole and Hendrix jumps down first, landing on his feet with grace

and dare I say it... style. He drops the woman to the floor and holds his hands out for me. I jump down and he catches me, then he scoops up the sleeping owner once more.

‘After you.’

I lead the way, heading to the office, and as we walk, the flames die down before us. I let them reignite after we’ve passed, because Hendrix is right. The people outside expect this place to burn and if it doesn’t, that will raise suspicions. We walk through her office and find the door. I blast it off its hinges and we make our way through. The cellar is full of boxes and more oddities that clearly didn’t make the cut for display. But we have what we came for safely on my finger and pass by without much interest. The tunnel is indeed blocked. But not for long. I clear it of mud and rock with a slight twitch of my hand and after a few minutes, we reach the doors that lead to the surface.

We stand across the road and watch the mob cheer and laugh as the house goes up in flames. There are more than fifty out there now and the hysteria a few had created has spread quicker and faster than the fire they set ever could. A couple of teenage boy’s leap on top of a car parked close by the inferno and start kicking through the windshield. I have no idea if it’s the woman’s car. Neither do they. The mentality to destroy without cause or consequence, has taken hold.

‘We need to go,’ Hendrix urges. ‘Before they see us.’ He lays the lady-owner down on the roadside. ‘Tell her to wake up and get the hell out of here before they spot her. They’ll lynch her if they do. The frenzy they’ve worked themselves into has taken over now.’

‘We’ve been in there less than half an hour. How could it have gotten so out of control?!’

‘We told ya.’ He shrugs plainly. ‘Mob mentality. It spreads quick and it’s dangerous. Now, like I said. Wake her up and let’s get the fuck outta here.’

After I’ve compelled the owner of the burning pile of rubble to get as far away from here as possible, and also to forget that I was able to compel her at all, we turn to leave ourselves. But an aggressive yell makes me turn. One of the lads from the car has spotted a couple of teenagers walking quickly past them. A young guy and his girlfriend who have their heads down and are charging away from the

commotion as quickly as their feet can carry them. The yob is yelling at them to stop. Others join him and I see the mob mentality spread for myself as they all turn their focus from the fire, to the couple. The young couple have dyed hair and piercings. They wear baggy jeans and dark hoodies. The yobs call them freaks and devil worshipers. They lift their bats and fists as they hurl abuse at the terrified couple. Hendrix's phone rings again and he picks it up.

'Yeah, we got the ring and we're out,' he reports, as I watch the events still unfolding. He looks at me. 'She's fine. Got us out unseen and without any injury. Yeah. Uh-huh. Okay, Grayson. We're coming your way.'

And unfortunately, the mob is heading the poor couple's way too. 'They're witches!' one of them hollers. 'Look at them! Look at what they're wearing. GET THEM!' The mob of teenagers start stampeding towards them. The poor girl screams in terror as her boyfriend begins dragging her away at a sprint. They're running for their lives and they know it.

'Hendrix, we have to help them!' I'm on my feet and ready to run over there to protect them. My flames appear on my hand in preparation for the fight.

'Cut her off!' Hendrix says down the phone as he grabs me by the waist and pins me to his body, stopping me from going to help.

'GET OFF ME!' I press my hand into his arm and the smell of his burning flesh fills my nostrils. 'THEY'RE GOING TO KILL THEM!'

'ARRGGGH! FUCK! CUT HER OFF, GRAYSON! NOW!' He drops the phone in the struggle. I scream as my magic leaves me, and knowing I'm powerless, Hendrix tosses me on the curb hard while clutching his burnt arm.

'You fucking bitch!' he spits.

As he tends his wound, I push myself up and start running towards them. I have to help them! I know Hendrix is coming after me. But I daren't look back at him. One of the mob members has reached the couple. He grabs the girl by her long, purple hair and hurls her into the road. Her boyfriend goes to help her up but is hit hard over the head with a baseball bat before he can. He goes down and tries to crawl away as his assailant raises the bat high above his head. His

pleas for mercy send a chill down my spine, but his words don't stop the bat coming down on his skull. Blood splatters the pavement and the boy falls still. The bat is raised again. And down it goes. The girl is screaming as more guys start pummeling the boy. Six are gathered around him and they are beating him into pulp. A boot thrusts into her face and she falls on her back. Two boys grab her ankles and drag her away from the growing crowd that surrounds what I assume is now the boy's corpse.

'STOP!' I scream through horrified tears. 'STOP! PLEASE!'

They start kicking the girl. Again and again and again. I want to be sick. I want to tear them all to pieces. She's curled up in the fetal position as they hammer down hit after hit. Passersby's don't help. They back away in fear or they join in. I'm the only one rushing to save her. Hendrix grabs me from behind and clamps his hand over my mouth so I can't scream another syllable. I'm thrashing and scratching, biting and hitting. But without my magic, I'm just a girl against a vampire four times my size. He hauls me through some bushes and into someone's front garden.

'You can't help her!' he tells me firmly.

Before either of us can say another word, we hear the shrillest most pain-filled scream I've heard in a while.

Four months in fact. Not since the night I left my uncle's home.

We turn, his hand still over my mouth, and we look on as the girl screams and rolls on the floor.

On fire.

They set her on fire!

She's burning alive and they all just watch. They laugh.

'Burn-the-witch!' They chant together. 'Burn-the-witch! Burn-the-witch!'

Her cries start to grow weaker. She stops writhing. She stops moving. And the mob cheer at her death.

Hendrix peels his hand away from my mouth because I've stopped

fighting. There's no point whatsoever going over there to help.

They're dead.

'We need to go,' Hendrix urges. 'Little Witch... Lilly, we have to go. Look!' Blue lights and sirens are descending on the crowd. The mob sees and start to scatter. Hendrix grips my arm and starts pulling me away.

'T-they were kids... They... They were just kids! How... How... I-'

'We have to go. Right now!'

I'm so in shock I just nod and let him guide me away. But my eyes never, not once, look away from the carnage we leave behind. From the bloody mess of the boy and the smoldering pile of his girl, to the high flames coming from the oddity museum, licking up at the sky.

I don't know how I got to this beach. I was watching nothing but my feet and somewhere along the line, tarmac turned to sand. Hendrix sits me down beneath a cliff face and picks up his phone which hasn't stopped ringing since we ran away. He wanders off, no further than a few meters, and answers the call. I can't focus on the words. He's nothing more than a mumbling in the distance, despite still being close by. I look out at the waves rolling up the shore. I watch the seagulls fly above the water.

I feel numb.

Hendrix rests his hand on my shoulder and gives me a comforting squeeze.

'You couldn't have saved them without dying yourself. Or exposing what you are.'

'Stop touching me,' I whisper.

'Listen. I know-'

'I said... stop. Just stop touching me, Hendrix. It feels like acid on my skin just... stop.' I brush him off. He steps away as I continue looking out to the water. My heart feels full of lead. My blood is running cold and adrenaline has my ears ringing. Shock prevents me from doing anything more than blinking and sitting still as a statue. I'm so lost in what I just saw, I don't sense magic as it approaches. I don't recognise or register voices. Only when Gabriel kneels down in front of me do I look away from the water and the first thing I see is the deep concern in his startling blue eyes. He brushes the hair from my face and rests his palm on my cheek. I take hold of it tightly with both of mine and kiss his knuckles again and again before sinking into his lap and burying my face in his neck. I'm so glad he's here.

'Gabriel, did you see? Did you see what they did?'

'I saw. We all saw. You couldn't have helped them, Beautiful. None of us could. Not without exposing what we are or compromising your

safety,' he says sweetly in my ear, his hand rubbing circles around my back.

I lift my head and look him in the eye. He goes to wipe my tears. But there are none to wipe dry. I have none to shed through this anger I'm feeling. Through this disappointment and disgust at what I just witnessed. He searches my eyes and whatever he sees seems to make him a little uneasy.

'Talk to me,' he says, holding my face with gentle hands. 'What's going on in that head?'

My eyes drift over his shoulder. 'You know, this is the first time I've ever seen the ocean. I've never felt sand before today. I've never smelt the salt on a breeze or felt the spray of the waves on my face. I've read about the sea.'

'I remember. You told me that seventy-percent of our planet is covered in water. That for every litre of seawater there is, there are thirty-five grams of salt. But that you've never once seen it with your own eyes.'

'You remember me telling you that?'

'Of course. At the tree lot. After you handed my arse to me and told me I was an idiot,' he says, with an affectionate smile. There's a slight disturbance over to the side as Grayson attempts to pass Hendrix and get to me. His eyes are on the ring sitting on my finger, but every attempt Grayson makes to get past, Hendrix stops him, telling him I need to have a minute to calm down. Gabriel guides my face back to him.

'Ignore them. Talk to me. You still with me?'

'I'm not going to give in to my Break.' My words are firm and final. 'I know now, more than ever, that I cannot let my Break take me. There's enough evil in the world.'

'Good. I'm very happy to hear that.' But he still looks nervous.

'One thing is for certain. Something has become crystal clear to me today.'

'What's that, Beautiful?'

I pull off the ring and toss it to Grayson who catches it. 'Magic must return if we're to survive. No way humans will let the Descendants live in peace if they find them. They've been brainwashed into thinking we're less than vermin. Without magic they're defenseless. Without magic... We're all going to die.'

Grayson and I share a look of understanding. For the first time ever, I think we're on the same page. I saw two strangers beaten and burnt to death for nothing more than dressing differently. He witnessed his family butchered for simply breathing.

We are hated. We are loathed. More than that, we are feared, which fuels their violence and need to destroy us or anything that may be close to magical in nature.

I turn back to Gabriel and rest my forehead against his.

'We need to see this through,' I tell him. 'Never mind Grayson's threats. We have to do the spell because it's the right thing to do.' With a deep sigh, I just let myself soak up his aura. The magic I sense from him surrounds me like a blanket of protection and much needed courage and comfort. 'If I had to watch you die like that...' I can't finish the words. The idea is simply too much to comprehend.

'You won't. Of course you won't.'

'No,' I tell him with certainty as I pull him into a hug. 'I won't.'



There was no hanging around. We got into the cars and started the five-hour drive to London. We can't risk the other ring being lost to another mob. Grayson didn't insist on separating Gabriel and I this time. I think he saw that I needed him. At least until the blood stopped pumping through my body a million miles per hour and the shaking subsided. We're sat in the back seat as Billy drives the car. Grayson and Hendrix are in a Bentley behind us and a few miles back is another car with three Nomads inside. Grayson sent the others back to protect the camp. The violence and cruelty we witnessed has shaken us all up a little. None of us are new to violence or death. But seeing it spread like that. Watching children kill children and laugh. That was something else entirely.

‘Lilly?’ Gabriel says softly beside me, ‘Are you hungry?’

‘No.’ I shift so I can rest my head on his shoulder. I have this need to be as close to him as possible. This compulsion to touch him. The magic I sense from him is more comforting than anything else I could have right now. It’s his soul. His essence. It loves me and wants to keep me safe, and right now, I need to feel that. Because I need to know that there is more to this world than hateful humans and wrathful Hunters. Psychotic witches who want to destroy me or drive me insane or own me.

I need to know that there is love.

And he holds me in his arms so relieved that I’m still here. Still alive and in one piece.

After an hour or so, I may still be refusing food but the cars need fuel, so we make a stop.

Gabriel uses the rest-room as I wait outside for him, basking in the sunshine. Grayson remains in the car with his hood up and his phone pressed constantly to his ear as Billy and Hendrix fill the cars with petrol. All three men watch me like a hawk as I observe the cars whizz past us on the motorway. Hendrix goes inside to pay and when he comes out he stops to hand me a packet of choc-chip cookies.

‘You should eat.’

‘I’m sorry I burnt you.’ I look at his arm. Under his jacket, I know his skin is red and blistered. ‘I just wanted to help them.’

‘I know. Forget it.’ He shrugs and looks out at the cars with a heavy sigh. ‘Humanity fucking sucks. They are all complete and utter shits. All they’re good for is eatin’.’

‘The couple they killed didn’t deserve what happened to them. They couldn’t have been any older than sixteen. They weren’t evil, Hendrix. They were probably just on a date. Going to the beach.’

‘So were the fuckers that walked past and let those hoodies murder ’em. Face it. Humans are weak. They get scared which means they get violent.’

‘I’ve seen witches do much worse.’ My eyes drift over to Grayson. ‘Much, much worse. How is he? Still in a foul mood?’

‘He’s okay. I talked him down. He won’t hurt ya or nothin’.’

‘Alright?’ Gabriel asks as he appears by my side. I fit perfectly into the crook of his arm. ‘We good to go, Hendrix?’

‘We’re good to go. Listen, I had a word with Grayson. About how we’re gonna get the ring without setting off all the alarms.’

‘And?’

‘Well, I simply suggested that it made sense for ya to come in with us. You can go to the security office and tell them to disarm it with your powers of persuasion, while Little Witch and I go fetch the ring.’

Gabriel contemplates the plan and nods. ‘Sounds good. Did Grayson agree?’

‘Grayson agreed, but he ain’t so happy about it. It’s the British Museum after all. Security’s gonna tight. We set the alarms off, we’ll be swamped with cops. Not the best thing right now. If a Hunter gets too close, they’ll sense ya with their mark. Best just go in and be as quiet as possible.’ As he turns away to head back to his car, he nods at me while keeping his focus on Gabriel. ‘She could do with some sleep. She had a nasty shock earlier and she’s gonna need her strength in case we come up against something in London.’

Hendrix turns and joins Grayson in the car.

‘I think he’s getting soft. Either that, or he’s got a thing for you,’ Gabriel teases.

‘Gross.’

‘C’mon. Let’s get going,’ he laughs, draping his arm over my shoulders.



Several hours later, I’m standing with Hendrix and Gabriel at the base of the marble steps which lead up to the main entrance of the

British Museum. Despite the fact that it's due to close in an hour, there are still hundreds of people about. They sit on the steps eating sandwiches or take photographs of themselves with their thumbs up and tongues out, posing in front of this stunning, historical building. Grayson is sitting in the car which is parked a few minutes from here in an underground garage. Both Grayson and Gabriel's faces are all over the news, as is the image of the burning museum back in Cornwall. They've been blamed for the fire. Another terror attack against humanity. Disgustingly, there is no mention of the jobs and the deaths of the young couple.

Gabriel is wearing a cap and a pair of dark sunglasses. Hendrix still has his shades on too.

I pull the collar of Gabriel's leather jacket tighter around myself and breathe in his scent.

'Ready?' Gabriel asks, taking my hand.

'Ready,' Hendrix and I reply.

We all take a deep breath, and head up the steps together.

∞ ∞ ∞

'Wow... Just... Wow.' I walk across the marble floor, through the Great courtyard and look up at the glass roof in awe. 'This place is incredible. Utterly incredible. And I'm not even near the exhibits yet.'

'Hey, do you remember that documentary you made me watch a couple of weeks back?' Gabriel asks. 'About ancient Egypt?'

'Yeah, why?'

'Come look at this.' Gabriel pulls me left. Hendrix follows behind. We walk through a doorway before Gabriel stops. My breath gets stuck in my throat as I stand, mouth open and eyes on stalks. I let out an actual squeal. A real, high pitched, dancing on the spot squeal.

'That's why,' he grins.

My hands and nose press up against the glass.

‘It’s the Rosetta Stone!’ I gasp. ‘It’s *the* Rosetta Stone! Gabriel... Gabriel! Look!’ I pull him closer and jab at the glass, like he can’t see the slab of rock right in front of his face. ‘It’s the Rosetta Stone!’

‘I see it,’ he laughs. ‘I see it. It’s stunning, huh?’

‘It’s incredible. I never thought... In my wildest dreams... Wow, the Rosetta Stone,’ I say softly under my breath.

‘It’s a rock,’ Hendrix mumbles impatiently.

‘A rock?!’ I hiss. ‘Goddamn heathen! This stone... those engravings... they made reading ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs possible! Without it, a whole civilization would still be shrouded in mystery.’

‘You wanna fuck it? Come on. Let’s find-’

‘Beautiful?’ Gabriel takes my shoulders and leans into my ear. ‘Look around you.’ He steps back. I think my heart explodes with wonderment as I take in the rest of this majestic room. My feet carry me towards the stone bust of Pharaoh Ramesses. Past enormous statues of the Gods Ra, Osiris and Horus. Past tablets carved with prayers. Along the Pink Sphinxes and then through to the Persian exhibit, then onto ancient Rome. I’m lost in history. In beauty. In a part of the world I never thought I’d see. The world long gone but still so present. Everyone else who marvels at these artifacts are just as fascinated by it all as me. Gabriel stands by my side and lets me talk his ear off. He watches my enthusiasm and just beams at how excited I am as I tell him everything I know about the artifacts in front of us. I learnt about so many of them in the books back at Harry’s house. I never thought for a second I’d see any of them with my own eyes. I sink into his chest and our arms fold around each other as we look at the mummy of Katebet.

Hendrix is starring at the mummy with his arms folded. ‘Hey, Lilly?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Ya know about this stuff. Did they *really* pull the brains out through the nose when they made a mummy?’ He leans in to the plaque and carries on reading. ‘That’s what it says here. Is it true?’

‘Yeah. They did.’

‘Wow. Those bastards were crazy,’ he says, fascinated. ‘With red-hot poker... Damn.’

‘They were dead when they did it, to be fair.’

‘They hoped.’ Hendrix looks at me with a grin. ‘Did ya know, a few hundred years ago, in a town in Somerset, the graveyards started to get full, so they started digging up graves and storing the old bones in a bone-house so they could re-use the graves for fresh corpses?’

‘Really?’ I ask. ‘That’s gross!’

He nods. ‘That’s not the gross part. One in thirty of the coffins had scratch marks on the inside. Turns out, the poor bastards were being buried alive by accident. So, they started burying people with string tied to their wrists. The string was fed up to the surface and attached to a little bell. Some bloke would sit in the graveyard all night to listen for a bell so they could be dug back up.’

‘No way.’ I look at Gabriel. ‘Is that true?’

‘Where do you think the phrase Graveyard shift came from?’ Gabriel teases.

‘Or dead ringer?’ Hendrix laughs.

I look between them and have no idea if they’re lying or not.

Then, an announcement over the PA system declaring that the museum will close in half an hour, throws us back into reality.

‘We need to find the ring,’ I moan.

‘It’s in the Jewelry of Elizabeth exhibit,’ Gabriel says. ‘You two head up there. I’ll meet up with you after you get it.’

‘Where are you going?’

He pecks my cheek. ‘To ask the security guard very nicely to turn off all the alarms so you can get it without them going off. Give me ten minutes and it will be safe to grab the ring without alerting the authorities.’ He glances at Hendrix who checks his watch.

‘Ten minutes.’ Hendrix nods. ‘Got it. We’ll meet you back at the main entrance after.’

‘You look after my girl, Hendrix.’

‘With my life,’ he replies, taking my elbow.

‘Love you,’ Gabriel tells me.

‘Love you more.’

After a kiss on my forehead, he says, ‘Impossible. See you in a few.’

‘Come on,’ Hendrix says, heading towards the stairs and guiding me along with him. ‘Let’s go find the ring.’

We head on up and pass the tourists as they prepare to leave. Hendrix still has on his dark sunglasses and keeps his head down, leaving me to look all around me as we walk. We reach the first floor and find the next flight of stairs. Up we go. It’s obvious that the less popular exhibits are kept up here. Quieter and quieter it becomes. As we find the final flight of stairs and start to climb, I feel something. I keep my feet going and focus on the odd sensation that is getting stronger and stronger the further on we walk.

I think... Is it magic?

I know what magic feels like. I know the sensation that being close to a witch creates with my Sensativa. But this is something else.

It’s power. Complete power. Magic without emotion or agenda. There’s no feeling of love or protection like I feel from Gabriel. Or hatred and destruction like Theo.

We reach the third floor. I walk ahead and lead us to the right. With every step, the sensation gets stronger. It’s like it’s calling me closer and closer. We walk through the scroll room. Under the archway that leads to the Italian art exhibit and across the room to where there is a single glass door in the corner. I rest my hand on the handle, push it open and head inside.

The room is small and windowless. Unlike the house back in Cornwall, this place is cold and almost sterile. The walls are all a

brilliant white with bright silver lamps placed in lines across the ceiling, casting everything in an almost painful fluorescent glow. The exhibits are encased, in precise lines, behind thick glass. It's completely lacking in any character. But the feeling in this room is everything. Everything!

I start to walk across the room towards the stand-alone case ahead of me. My fingers flex by my side as I feel the air vibrate around me. The room is silent. It's only us in here and when I finally reach the case, I know, without question, that the unimposing little ring with a red stone and a seven-pointed star set in the middle, placed amongst twelve others of similar size and style, is the real deal.

It's Rebecca Hooper's ring. I can feel magic emanating from it. We might as well take the other one and toss it in the bin.

A soft-spoken voice carries over the PA system, informing us that the museum doors will close in fifteen minutes. Hendrix watches the second-hand tick on his watch.

'Alright then. Been ten minutes. Lover-boy should have compelled the security guard to disable the alarm.' Hendrix punches through the glass. A shrill siren starts to blast. I clamp my hands over my ears to stop them from hurting.

Hendrix and I share a worried look.

'Well, that can't be good,' he mutters, stowing the ring in his pocket.

'We need to find Gabriel! Something's gone wrong!'

'Looks that way. *Shit!* C'mon.' He takes my arm. 'We need to find him and fast. The shit is really about to hit the fan.'

As we turn to leave, I see an unexpected but familiar face standing in the doorway.

'Hello,' she greets cheerfully, giving a little wave. It's the owner of the oddity museum back in Cornwall. She's no longer in her odd and bright wardrobe, but dressed in black combat gear.

'What the hell are you doing here?' I call over the alarms, filling with panic and worry for Gabriel.

Still smiling, she pulls out a gun and points it at me. 'I'm here to kill you of course, witch-scum!'

And then, she pulls the trigger.

Hendrix shoves me hard out of the way and charges the woman. I crash onto the floor and watch him get hit three times before he reaches her. Her horror at the ineffectiveness of the wounds she has inflicted come out in a scream. He takes the gun and slams it into her face, knocking her down at his feet, before taking off his glasses and roaring furiously at her.

‘W-what the hell are you?’ she stammers, looking at his teeth and eyes.

He wraps his fingers around her throat and lifts her off the ground before dragging her into the room and closing the door. I gasp as I receive access to my magic. Grayson must have heard the alarms. I push myself back onto my feet and tell him I have access before standing by his side to look up at her.

‘You alright, Little Witch?’ Hendrix asks. ‘Did ya get hit?’

‘No. I’m Fine.’ I examine the patches of red on his torso. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine.’ He pulls the woman closer. ‘Bullets can’t kill a vampire.’ He snarls at her, making sure she hears the truth about what kind of creature has her right now. ‘What the hell are ya doin’ here?’ She doesn’t answer. Perhaps she can’t through his grip.

‘Drop her,’ I tell him. He does. Before she can scramble away, I summon my Mental magic. My eyes blacken. ‘Stay exactly where you are.’ She stills. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I’m here to kill you all. Filthy vermin.’ She spits at my feet.

‘You know I’m a witch? How? I compelled you to forget.’

‘I knew as soon as I saw you. After the fire broke out, I woke up outside, overcome with the need to get away from the house. On my way out of town, my mark continued to burn. So I followed the pain. All the way here.’

‘Your mark?’

‘Err...’ Hendrix leans down and lifts up her sleeve. ‘Shit.’

‘What’s that?’ It looks like a brand but the pattern is intricate swirls entwined with hard lines and odd symbols.

‘It’s the Hunters Mark.’ He swallows hard as he tells me, ‘She’s a Witch Hunter.’

‘A Witch Hunter?’ I repeat in a whisper, taking a small step back. ‘Hunters are here?’

‘Told ya we should have left her behind in that fire.’ Hendrix nudges me closer to the Hunter. She looks up at us with a stubborn defiance. ‘Make her talk. Ask her if she’s here alone.’ He watches me. ‘Hey! Focus!’

‘Are you here alone?’ I ask her quickly, looking past her to the door.

‘Yes,’ she replies begrudgingly.

‘Why not kill us at the house? What were you waiting for?’

‘Orders. But before I could receive them, the house was attacked. I thought if I carried on pretending to be the owner’s mother, you wouldn’t kill me before I could kill you.’

‘Do other Hunters know where we are? Have they got Gabriel?’

Her mouth goes into a hard line as she fights my compulsion. But she can’t and she has no choice but to answer. ‘No. I’m alone.’

‘Why? Why come after us alone?’

‘Because I wanted to prove to them that a woman Hunter is just as good - better even - than a male Hunter.’

‘You wanted the glory,’ Hendrix scoffs. ‘How did that work out for you?’

‘Better than this is going to work out for you. You’re all as good as

dead.'

I grab him before he goes to hit her. 'Hendrix... Gabriel! We need to find him!'

'We will. Calm down. I'm sure he's okay.'

The sirens stop. The alarm falls silent.

'We really need to get you out of here,' he says.

'We need to find Gabriel!'

Hendrix grabs the Hunter. 'C'mon then. We'll take her with us. Get some intel about the Hunters.' He opens the doors to seven men with guns, all pointing at us. 'Oh shit.'

'Put your hands in the air and step outside the room or we will... Dear lord... What are you?' They see our black eyes and Hendrix's teeth. 'WITCHES! THEY'RE WITCHES!' One of the other men grabs a walkie-talkie.

'The thieves are witches! We need Hunters here. NOW!'

A voice crackles back. 'Shoot to kill! Hunters are on their way.'

'GET DOWN!' Hendrix orders me. They open fire as I dive out of the way. In a quick move, Hendrix grabs the Hunter and uses her as a shield. 'RUN, LILLY!' Hendrix orders, as more officers start running up the main steps towards us. 'I GOT THIS. FIND GABRIEL BEFORE HUNTERS GET HERE. GO!'

He's off, head first into the fight. My fear for Gabriel's safety consumes me as I turn towards the stairs at the rear of the museum. The sound of Hendrix roaring and bullets being fired fade the further I run. There is no way that Gabriel would fail in turning off the alarms. Something must be wrong.

There's a loud crackling noise over the PA system, followed by a few taps of someone's finger on the mic.

'Testing... testing... one two. One two. Is this thing on?'

My feet slow and I stop at the very top of the steps.

‘Looking good, Red.’ Toby’s voice mocks over the speakers. I look up and see the camera in the corner pointed right at me. It starts moving side to side. ‘Look. I’m waving at you,’ he laughs. His voice echoes through the stairwell. It bounces off the walls and the stone floors, making it so much louder. ‘Need a hand, Red?’ he asks, in a low tone that was once seductive to me. ‘You look like you need a hand.’

I walk up to the camera and stick up my middle finger. He laughs.

I *need* to find Gabriel!

I close my eyes and flex out my fingers, searching for him with my Sensativa. But I can’t feel him.

‘You looking for me?’ Toby asks. I turn my back to the camera and keep searching for Gabriel. ‘Or are you looking for my brother?’ My heart stops. ‘I tell you, he wasn’t expecting to open the security guard’s office door to find me, no sir. Turn around, Red. Let me see you.’

Slowly, I turn and face the camera.

‘What do you want?’ I yell at him.

‘I can’t hear you, but if I’m right, you’re asking what I want. Well, let me tell you precisely what I want. You, Red. I want you. So, come to the security office and I will offer you a trade. Gabriel for you. You have three minutes to get here. For every minute you keep me waiting after that, I start cutting. Starting with the hands he had no right touching you with. And be quick. Hunters are on their way.’ The mic clicks off.

I don’t leave a second to spare. I’m acting on pure impulse. I have to save Gabriel! I sprint down the stairs. As I run, I see in tunnel vision. Nothing else matters. I have to get to Gabriel. I run and I run.

‘One minute down.’ Toby’s mocking laughter follows me through every room and corridor. I don’t waste time opening doors. I blast them off their hinges and sprint through the holes I leave behind. Anything that gets in my path is obliterated. Doors. Statues. Priceless artifacts.

‘Run, little rabbit,’ he whispers over the speakers. ‘Come and find me.’

No matter where I turn, I can't find anything more than the museum's prized possessions. I have no idea where the security guard room is. But that doesn't stop me trying to find him. I just keep moving.

'Two minutes down.'

In the quickest glimpse, I see a woman standing at the base of the steps. Just standing, watching me. She's in a pair of striped pyjama shorts and a battered and bloody hoodie. She watches me with tears streaming down her face. Her hand is settled on her belly and blood is trickling down her legs.

She's me. Watching as I run after my monster. She's crawled out from my subconscious, wearing the clothes I spent so many years in while down in that cellar. The sad girl. Forgotten girl. Lost and desperate to die girl. She did die. Down there in that hole, cradling her empty womb and mourning the loss of a life that had a heart beat for only a matter of weeks. Her ghost never left. She haunts me every day. And as I run past my spectre, her hair starts to turn white. Her eyes lilac. And now, she's my Broken-self. And she's screaming. *"RUN! RUN! KILL!"*

She wants her revenge. We all do. My broken side. My desperate to die side. And the side of me that wants to live and fight and give us all our revenge. But revenge must wait. First, Gabriel must be saved.

'Tick-tock,' Toby whispers.

I run. I run and I run.

'Left,' he laughs, when I approach a three-pronged corridor. He wants me to find him and I want to find him as well, so I follow his instructions. 'Right,' he says excitedly. I turn as he instructs, still running as fast as I can. My feet skid on the shiny floor and I crash onto my side, but I'm up again and running. 'Down the stairs, Red. Thirty seconds. Hurry!'

I leap down two at a time. My hand grips the stone bannister as I almost fall down them. I land on my knees at their base and push myself back up.

'Ouch. Did that hurt?' he asks. 'Almost there, Red. Come and find me. I'll kiss it all better for you.'

'Fuck you!' I scream, as if he can hear me.

He laughs. 'You look so mad right now. I do love it when you get angry. Your angry side was always your best side. That... and your

desperate need to please me.' I push down the need to threaten him. That would be pointless. I keep running. 'That's it. Through the doors. Hurry, you're almost out of time.' The mic clicks off and that's the last I hear of him over the speakers. I smash the doors to pieces and run through a large foyer with a fountain in the middle. There's still no sign of him. There's no sign of anyone. But now, I can sense him. I feel his magic bristling through the air. It's cruel and sadistic. I stretch out my hand, weaving the sensation through my fingers, and I feel Gabriel's too, just on the other side of two large double doors made of frosted glass.

I run, faster than I have ever run before. The closer I get, the more I feel them.

My fire comes to me. My arms are burning bright. My red flames cover my skin as I approach the door. Everything seems to be moving in slow motion. My feet go one in front of the other.

I reach the doors and the glass shatters. Chunks slowly fly outwards. They float through the air as if suspended in water. I charge into the main courtyard with the glass roof. And as soon as I do, my magic leaves me. It just... goes! The shattered glass clatters to the floor. My fire abandons me.

Grayson has cut me off.

I'm powerless.

Why? Why would he do that?

Standing in the middle of the courtyard, side by side, under the glass roof, is Ava and Toby. At their feet is Gabriel, bound and gagged. He has a bad head wound and is bleeding from his forehead. His arms are above his head, his wrists trapped beneath Toby's boot.

'Oh dear. Has your magic gone? How ever will you defeat me now?' Toby taunts. Resting over his shoulder is a red axe. He lifts it and points the bladed end at me. 'You're late. Don't say I didn't warn you.'

In a swift move, he lifts the axe high above his head and looks at Gabriel. 'I told you not to touch my girl. Now... you won't. Ever. Again.' With an evil grin, Toby brings the axe down, and severs Gabriel's arm from his elbow.

Gabriel's howl of agony and fury echo all around us. Blood spills from his severed arm in a thick pool.

'YOU'RE DEAD!' I screech, my eyes on Toby. I can't believe he just did that! To his own brother! 'I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU!' I charge. I don't care I have no magic. I don't care about anything.

Ava runs at me from the side and smashes into me. We crash to the floor. Sitting atop me, she starts hitting, laughing maniacally as she hammers down hit after hit. I block her and look at Gabriel. He's all I care about right now, and right now, Toby is positioning himself by his other arm, axe still in hand.

'She's mine,' he tells Gabriel, twirling the axe in his hand. 'Always has been, always will be.' Gabriel's eyes watch him closely. He's pale and shaking with pain. He's probably in shock. But the anger in his eyes is unlike anything I have seen before. 'After I've cut off your other arm, I'll cauterise your wounds, so don't worry. I can't have you bleeding out. Then, I'll be taking her. And I know what you're thinking, yes, Grayson has the Bloodstone. But you see, what I have planned for her, that won't matter. What I have planned for her will make Ryan, Theo and Grayson look like kittens. You'll be too busy running away from us, to even contemplate tracking her down.'

Gabriel twists his body and kicks out Toby's legs. Toby and the axe fall to the floor and Gabriel looks straight at me before nodding to the crazy bitch trying to bash my skull in with her fists. I focus on my own battle, lowering my arms so that when she sees a clear shot, I move aside and she punches the stone floor instead. I hear her knuckles crunch before she falls back, howling in pain, clutching her broken hand to her chest. I shove her off and run towards Gabriel.

His kick gave him a few seconds, but Toby is back on his feet. The blood surrounding Gabriel is growing every second. He tries to stand, but he can't. Toby slams his boot into Gabriel's face, knocking him down in a daze. He rolls over... but that's all he can manage. Toby lifts the axe.

'HEY!' I shout, running at him as fast as my legs can carry me. He looks up just in time to see me bulldoze into him. We land in a heap. He drops the axe, but only so he can wrap his arms around my waist.

'Hey, red,' he moans longingly in my ear. 'I always did like you on

top.'

Half his face is scarred from my attack last time we met. His skin, although healed, is heavily marked from my flames. It's far worse than the mark he left on my thigh all those years ago. His attention shifts past me to the roof.

'Oh... shit!' I don't get a chance to look before he rolls us over and covers my body with his. The roof shatters and we're covered in glass. Great big chunks plummet down. I look up, past him, and see a dozen or more figures, all dressed in black, standing on the metal frame of the once great and beautiful glass roof. In their hands are guns. 'Well... this can't be good.' Toby sits and sends a great wave of his flames upwards and outwards, creating a ceiling of fire between us and them. But they start shooting. Bullets bury into the floor. Dozens upon dozens. And then smoke grenades land all around us. In the chaos, I push Toby off me and crawl to Gabriel. My hands cut on the glass. Soon, I can't see through the smoke from both Toby's fire and the grenades. I feel blindly for Gabriel, calling his name again and again. But I'm drowned out by the noise.

My hand finds Gabriel's blood and finally, him. I pull him into my arms, untie his wrist from his severed limb and take off his gag. He's painfully weak and barely able to sit.

'You have to run,' he tells me. 'Go. Leave me.'

'No.' I shake my head and start getting to my feet, pulling him up with me. 'Not without you. Never without you.' I take as much of his weight as possible, draping his remaining arm around my shoulders.

'I'll compel you if I must!'

'Look at me.' I stare him straight in the eye. 'If you compel me away and I lose you, Gabriel, I will Break. I can't do this without you. I can barely do it with you. I need you, okay?'

'I can barely walk! I'm not getting out of here without getting killed or getting caught.'

'Then neither am I. Together, or not at all. Now come on. Try and walk before we get shot.'

I half drag, half carry him through the thick smoke, missing bullet

after bullet by some miracle. He leaves behind a trail of blood as I guide him towards the gift shop built beneath the central dome. The walls of which are made of clear glass. I push open the door and haul him inside. At least in here, there's no smoke and we can breathe. The lights are off and it gives us some cover. We crumple to the floor behind a bookshelf and I hold him in my arms. I start feeling for his belt and quickly begin sliding it off.

'I'm flattered, but I don't think now is the time,' he teases weakly.

'I need to stop the bleeding.' I wrap it around his stump and tighten it as much as I can. He howls in pain and I apologise over and over. With it in place, he sinks into my body.

'What now?' he asks. 'Are they Hunters?'

'I think so. Hendrix and I met a Hunter upstairs before we got separated.'

'You should have left!'

'I need my magic. Grayson, he cut me off for some reason. Do you have a phone?'

He shakes his head.

'But I know his mobile number,' he tells me, pointing to the phone behind the cash desk. Gently, I lay him down and run over to grab it. Suddenly, the gunfire stops and Toby's fire fades. Outside the glass walls of the shop, it's painfully quiet. I reach out my hand. Toby's magic is fading. He's leaving. Running like the coward he is. But in the smoke, dark shadows move around. The men with guns are here, and they're looking for us. I duck down with the phone in my hand and crawl back to Gabriel, before pulling him further back into the store so as to not be seen. With him between my legs and my back braced against the wall, I give him the phone.

'Dial, baby,' I whisper. 'Quickly. Before they find us.'

His fingers are slow and cumbersome as he dials. When he's done, he gives me the phone and slumps into me, exhausted.

I press it to my ear. It's ringing.

The door to the shop opens. Smoke floods in. The sound of feet crunching on glass makes my heart hammer.

‘Gabriel,’ I whisper quietly into his ear, shaking him. ‘Compel him to leave.’

But Gabriel’s head lolls forward. I have to pin him to my chest to stop him falling. The phone continues to ring. More smoke pours in. Whoever has joined us walks slowly. I see them pass through the shelves separating us, and spot the riffle in his hands. I pin Gabriel closer to me.

Pick up. Pick up.

Gabriel’s arm slides onto the floor and jolts a magazine rack. The armed man stops and spins around. I hold my breath.

The phone continues to ring.

The man turns and leaves, letting the door close behind him.

‘Thank God,’ I whisper. ‘Pick up the fucking phone, Grayson... Oh no...’ A shadow stands outside the glass-wall of the shop. He’s facing us. Then, another joins his side. And another. And another. Four figures, and they all raise their guns.

‘WHAT?!’ Grayson’s voice snaps down the phone. ‘WHO IS THIS?’

‘Grayson, I need my mag-’

The firing starts and I scream. The glass walls shatter as bullets pour in and I throw Gabriel on the floor, draping myself over him. I take a bullet in the leg and one in the arm. I have no idea if Gabriel’s been hit, but I do my best to cover him.

‘HELP US!’ I scream as loud as I can down the phone. ‘GRAYSON! MAGIC! NOW-’ I get hit in the side of my belly and fail to say another word. I drop the phone. The bullets keep coming. Chunks of wall and bits of the shop’s stock rain down on us.

This is it. This is where it ends for me. For us. I grip Gabriel even tighter, taking solace in the fact that I will die here with him, in his arms.

Gabriel's hand tucks my hair behind my ear as I lift my head and look down at him.

'I love you, my beautiful girl,' he says weakly. 'You have been the best part of my entire life.' His eyes can barely stay open. 'You should have run.'

'Together. Or not at all. I told you.' I reach up and brush the hair from his face. 'I love you. So much. So, so much. If I had to go through it all again, just to be with you, I would. I would.'

I lean down and we kiss, one final time. The tug of unconsciousness is pulling me. The wound to my side is deep. Gabriel's hand falls limp by his side and his kiss stops. I let out a final and desperately sad cry. Another bullet hits my shoulder and I fall off him, landing at his side on my back. I take his hand in mine and look up at the ceiling, feeling the warmth of our blood soaking through our clothes.

Then... magic.

Grayson gives me access.

A furious scream explodes from my mouth, and with it, a shockwave of telekinetic power erupts outwards. The inside of the shop pelts away from us and crashes outwards into the main courtyard. The bullets return and hammer into the men as they soar through the air and slam into the walls. I hear yelling as the others notice what's happened.

I surround Gabriel and I in a circle of fire and look at him. He's unconscious and blood mist comes from his mouth.

I can't imagine my life without him. All those beautiful promises we made to each other, none of them will come true. It's a pain in my heart that makes me want to die. I imagine burying him. I imagine the Nomads losing the protection of the Kendryk brothers. I see it all, like a film playing out before my eyes.

The light in him, the magic, is growing duller.

Any second now, it will go out for good.

And when I think that thought, my heart swells to such a magnitude, it screams out for the power to save him.

The Arcane realm hears me.

I feel the manifestation.

My Physical magic awakens and I become endowed with the

strength of a hundred men. My muscles bloom and renew. I know I could tear up trees or crush a man's skull. My magic is a storm of power and everything around me comes to life. The red lightning that I gained only a few days ago, streaks out in lines around me, hitting the floor and the walls and the ceiling. Not just from my body, but all over the museum, striking the men with guns. The paintings on the wall ignite and go up in flames. The staircase trembles above me and chunks of marble and plaster fall with a clatter to floor. My emotions spill out of me through my magic and it's taking everything I have not to explode and take this whole building with me. My lungs feel fit to burst. My head throbs. And every cell screams to life as it accepts this new realm of power. The museum is crumbling around me. It shakes and the ground trembles. My magic is beyond my control as it destroys this magnificent monument to history, bit by bit. I look at Gabriel, tears streaming my face.

'How do I save you?' I cry, shaking him. 'Wake up, tell me how to save you.'

He doesn't move.

I roll over and rest my head on his chest. I'm slick with his blood. It's drenched my hair.

Then Hendrix's words pop into my head. The words he said to me at the oddity museum in Cornwall.

"Magic ain't in stuff, Little Witch. It's in blood. It's all about the blood. That's where magic really lives. The Bloodstone? Your brand? All of it was made with your blood. Otherwise, the Bloodstone would just be a pretty rock and the mark on your arm would just be a burn. Blood is the source of the power you lot have. And it's the source of life for my kind. To share blood, that's real power."

I take my hand which is shredded from crawling through the glass and reach over to where Gabriel's arm has been severed. My blood and his mix.

'Please work.' I clamp down hard. 'This has to work.'
I close my eyes. I feel my magic, the new realm of power, and I let it flow through me, through my blood, into him.

'Heal him.' I order. 'Heal him. Heal him. Heal him.' I repeat the words over and over, willing my magic to obey. Outside, I hear the sound of helicopters overhead. My magic is still creating devastation around me. There's no denying that somewhere in here is a witch.

They start firing down on us. Grenades? I have no idea. I see them land and create craters. I slam my other hand down on the floor. The stone cracks under the force of my new realm of power, and we crash to the floor below. I will not let him die. I get up on my knees and lean over him. In the darkness of the museum tombs, I can barely see a thing. Dust from the broken roof fills the air making it hard to breathe. Everything shakes as they attack from above.

None of that matters. None of it.

There's a loud groan. Chunks of the roof start coming loose and is crashing down on us, burying us. I lift my hand and hurl as much away from us as possible. My body is still exploding with power. Lightning and fire erupt all over my skin of its own accord. It's the wrong power. It's not what I need!

I take a deep breath in, and let it out slowly. My eyes go black.

'HEAL HIM!' I roar. 'SAVE HIM. NOW!' But the words I say come out as a different language. One I have never heard before.

Arcanian. I spoke Arcanian.

The last thing I see are Gabriel's eyes suddenly opening, and a blinding white light.

‘Please wake up. Please, please wake up.’

Those words echo in my ears. The voice sounds far away and frightened.

‘Open your eyes. Come on, Beautiful. Wake up.’

Gabriel’s words become louder and clearer. I start to move.

‘That’s it! That’s it! Come on. Wake up!’

I blink open my eyes and see him leaning over me. He’s cradling me in his lap and holding me close to his chest. Relief floods his face when our eyes meet.

‘Thank fucking christ!’ he says, wiping blood from my nose. ‘Bloody hell. I was starting to really freak out! Easy... Don’t move too much. Are you okay? Can you talk?’

‘I-I’m okay. I’m... Are *you* okay?’ I croak, reaching up to caress his cheek. There’s dried blood all over him and when I lift my hand, I see that I’m equally as covered. He kisses my hand again and again and nods, tears spilling down his face.

‘I’m okay.’ He nods. ‘I’m okay. You?’

‘I ache like a bitch,’ I groan.

He laughs and he pulls me into a hug, crying as he does.

I reach up and wrap my arms around his neck, bursting into tears too.

He’s alive. We’re both alive.

But, where are we?

It’s the middle of the night and it’s bitterly cold. The wind is

howling all around us and I can hear the ocean close by. The full moon in the sky casts a little light, showing me that we on the top of some cliffs... Hold on. Gabriel is stroking my hair, with the hand that, last I saw, was left on the floor of the Great Courtyard.

I sit back and examine Gabriel. And both his arms! I snatch it up and look at it closely. His long-sleeved top ends just above his elbow and is stained heavily with blood, but his arm is clean and new.

‘How?’ I look at him.

‘You,’ he says plainly. ‘I came to, the place was coming down around us, and I saw you leaning over me yelling Arcanian. Then everything went white and I woke up here with you about an hour ago. You were out cold and I had my arm back!’

‘Do you feel okay?’ I run my fingers along his skin, all the way to his elbow. ‘Can you move it alright? What about the blood loss?’

‘I feel fine,’ he insists, taking my hands in his. ‘Do you?’ He pokes his finger through the bullet hole in my heavily blood-stained top. ‘Did you get shot?’

I lift my top and feel my abdomen. There’s no sign of a wound at all. Nor in my shoulder or my leg! ‘I did get shot, but... I’m okay!’ I lift my gaze and smile at him. ‘I healed us both? I manifested my Physical magic and healed us both! You almost died! I almost died!’ I start to laugh and pull him into a hug. ‘We’re okay, baby. You’re okay.’

His embrace is consuming and so full of relief and love.

‘Where the hell are we?’ I ask.

‘I’ll show you. Can you stand?’

‘I think so.’ He gets to his feet and helps me to mine. Hand in hand, we walk towards the edge of the cliff. Below, the ocean crashes against the cliffs. The reflection of the moon ripples over the waves and the wind blows harder. Then, Gabriel turns me around. Behind us are miles of stone ruins protruding from the ground.

‘I have no idea how, but after the bright light, I woke up here with you. Just us. No one else. Not for miles.’

‘Where is “*here*” exactly?’

‘This is Tintagel. Or what’s left of it.’

‘Tintagel?’ I ask, in a stunned whisper. ‘As in...’

‘As in the village where I grew up. Where the Hunters first attacked. This is where the war started for us.’

The ruins stretch out as far as I can see. Remnants of houses and pathways. Stone arches and steps. I can imagine it was once a great village, full of life.

‘Why here?’ I wonder aloud. ‘How? How did we get here?’

‘You brought us here. This is where your Bloodstone came from. Maybe that has something to do with it. You had black eyes when you shouted in Arcanian. I think that the link between your Bloodstone and this place answered your command, and took us out of there before the place collapsed.’

‘Really?’

He shrugs. ‘Who knows.’ He stretches out his new arm. ‘How the hell you did any of this is beyond me. Maybe Connor-’

I reach up and slam my lips onto his.

‘I don’t care how. Or why. All I care about is that you’re okay. That we’re okay and we’re together. I thought for sure I had lost you. I love you, Gabriel. So fucking much.’

‘I love you more.’

‘Impos-’

His mouth crashes onto mine and we fall to the floor in a mess of limbs, tearing off each other’s clothes. Naked and filled with a need only the other can fulfill, he eases into me and we make love right then and there.

When the sun starts to rise, Gabriel guides me down a set of stone steps carved into the side of the cliff which leads to a small beach below. We wade into the icy water and wash off as much of the blood as possible, scrubbing our skin and clothes. A little cleaner and no longer looking like something that crawled out of a horror movie, we start walking along the cliffs. I don't have access to my magic, but we assume Grayson still has my Bloodstone. He'll come to us, we just need to keep out of sight until he does. We come across an old dilapidated hotel overlooking the sea. It's long been abandoned and has been left to rot. We break in through a boarded-up window and sit in the old lounge bar, snuggled up together in an old booth. I'm so exhausted, I fall asleep quickly.



'This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't cut her off from her magic.' Gabriel snaps quietly. 'We almost died, Grayson. She was shot and Toby cut off my fucking arm!'

'I told you, the only reason I cut her off was because I got a text from Hendrix telling me to. I thought she was losing control.'

'Then I need to ask Hendrix why he sent that message. And I plan on asking him violently.'

'He said he didn't have his phone at that point. That he had it when he walked in to the museum, but somewhere along the line it must have been stolen. He says that someone did bump into him while you were walking around like a bunch of common tourists, that maybe it was Ava and she took it. It was timed perfectly so it makes sense that they planned it that way. For her to be powerless at the right moment.'

Gabriel sighs. 'What shall we tell her?'

'I'll leave that up to you. You know her best. What do you think we should tell her?' Grayson replies sharply.

'Nothing. Not unless she asks at any rate.' My head is still in his lap and his hands run through my hair. 'She's obviously far more powerful than we expected.'

'Obviously,' Grayson scoffs.

‘But she’s still in a very vulnerable place emotionally. I don’t want to cause her any more distress.’

‘What’s happened?’ I sit, and look between them. Grayson is sat on an old barstool opposite us. He watches me sit as Gabriel rests his hand on my back. He looks at Gabriel, and so do I. ‘Gabriel? Is it Amara or Collins?’ I shoot a look back at Grayson. ‘What did you do? WHAT-’

‘Nothing, Beautiful,’ Gabriel insists, keeping me by his side. ‘They’re fine. Grayson isn’t angry at you. He’s... We’re just worried about you.’

‘Why? What’s happened? Tell me.’

With a deep breath, he tells me. ‘The bright light we saw? Well, after you transported us away two-hundred miles...’ The look of anguish on his face has me wanting to be sick.

‘What did I do?’ I whisper.

He takes my hand in his. ‘Nothing. You did nothing. Hunters did. They dropped a bomb-’

‘A bomb?’

‘Yes. Some kind of explosive and... well... people died, Lilly. The museum is gone. It’s all been destroyed.’

‘People died?’ I repeat. ‘Like... Hunters? They killed their own people? The ones with guns?’

‘The men that attacked us weren’t Hunters. They were Police. Special forces. Usually, they deal with terrorists. They got the call we were there and attacked before Hunters reached us. And... no. They weren’t the only casualties. They’re...’ He glances at Grayson and struggles to say the rest.

‘The explosion destroyed a number of the houses that surrounded the museum. They’re still going through the wreckage,’ Grayson explains coldly. ‘Twenty-three bodies have been recovered so far, but there are a hundred or so still missing.’ It gets harder to breathe. ‘The security footage of you all in the museum has been released to the

general public and your face, as well as Toby's, Ava's and Hendrix's, join ours all over the news. You're being blamed for the blast. We all are, but you especially.'

'Can we go and help them? Help get the people out?'

He shakes his head. 'You're wanted, Lilly. There's a bounty of fifteen-million pounds on each of us. Thirty for you. The whole country is looking for us...' He carries on talking, but the words muffle. I grip onto Gabriel and start sliding onto the floor. He slides with me and cups my face in his hand. Tears tumble down my cheeks.

'This is not your fault,' Gabriel tells me sternly.

'No. It's not my fault. It's theirs. They're dead because Hunters dropped a bomb on them. And they dare... they dare blame it on us?!' I shake my head. More tears fall and I can't tell if their appearance is through anger or grief for the loss of life. So, I make a choice. I chose anger. 'They won't get away with this.'



In the back seat of Grayson's car, I sit and stare out the tinted window in a daze, watching the world pass us by. Gabriel holds my hand but remains quiet. There really is nothing to say. Only when the car starts jolting me around do my eyes actually take in the scenery outside the window. We're in a woodland of some kind. A forest maybe. The tyres have left the smooth tarmac and is now travelling over rough ground. The sun has started to set in the distance. We've been driving all day. I don't know where we are, all I know is what we've left behind.

As it gets darker, the rough road becomes a narrow path and there's nothing to see but trees. They grow over the top of us like a tunnel. I press the little button and lower the window down as far as it will go so I can lean my head out to look up. The setting sun sneaks through the branches. My hair blows behind me. I smell the musty scent of rotting vegetation on the forest floor.

We're in the woodland for a while until we reach a large wooden gate. Three men appear with guns. They open the gate and we drive through.

After another mile, Grayson stops the car. He gets out and raps his

knuckles on the window. I open the door and step outside, followed by Gabriel. My legs are stiff and I'm beyond tired. I haven't slept properly in days. Gabriel zips up the front of my hoody so the blood staining my clothes is covered and makes sure my hair is tucked beneath its hood. He's gentle with me and takes his time.

'There,' he says, looking me over. 'You won't scare everyone now. You look a little, "Carrie at the prom".'

'I don't know what that means.'

'Never mind. Come on, Beautiful.'

I follow him. Grayson is close behind me. Soon, we emerge through the trees into a clearing.

A camp.

A group of children run past me, giggling as they chase each other. I stop and watch them waving sticks, pretending they're wands or swords. Some middle-aged women chat enthusiastically as they prepare a fire, and the older generation scowl and mutter between themselves. I watch a group of men appear from behind me with dead rabbits tossed over their shoulders, talking excitedly about the dinner they're all in for this evening. There are tents and cabins dotted all over the place. There must be a hundred or so, all varying in size and style. There are a few caravans and overhead are some powerlines. Ahead is a large shelter with sinks and running water. Several young girls are busy washing dishes, all talking with gusto. I can hear music coming from somewhere and plenty of excited chatter as people go about their business. Everyone looks perfectly normal and happy in their jeans and jumpers with boots or trainers. None have guns. Just friendly nods and smiles.

'Welcome to the Nomad camp,' Gabriel says in my ear. 'Or one of them at least.'

So this is the Nomad camp...

Grayson points behind me. 'There are some fallen logs over there they use as seating in the evening. Go sit yourself down while Gabriel and I have a quick chat. And do not, under any circumstances, talk about what happened. They have no idea what's been going on out there and I want to keep it that way. I want to avoid panic. Understand?'

'Perfectly.' After a quick kiss from Gabriel, I turn and make my way towards the logs. But there are too many people around. All I want is some peace and quiet. I walk a little further out and sit at the base of a tree just on the outskirts of the camp, looking out into the woodland.

Soon after, Hendrix appears with a bottle of beer and a bacon sandwich. He looks like hell, covered in cuts and filth.

'Here. Thought that if ya feel anything like me, ya might want

something to eat and drink.'

'Are you okay?' I ask, taking the beer but refusing the sandwich.

'Just about. I'm sorry I didn't get to ya, Little Witch. After I finally fought off the fellas trying to shoot me, all hell was breaking loose down below. Fire and guns and shit. I tried to call Grayson for back-up, but my phone was gone. I thought I could get to him and he would help ya. By the time I reached the car... Boom! I shouldn't have left ya and I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. If you hadn't, you'd have been killed too.' I sip the beer and look out into the trees.

Pulling out a flask, Hendrix takes a swig and watches me with a furrowed brow. 'How did ya get outta there?'

'Honestly? I have no idea.'

'I watched the footage they released to the public. Toby hacking off Gabriel's arm? Brutal.'

I turn away and look out into the trees, hating that Gabriel's yell of agony still echoes in my ears. That I came so close to losing him. 'Yeah. It was.'

After a few moments of silence, he nudges the sandwich closer. 'It's perfectly safe. I swear it. Look.' He pulls off a chunk and shoves it in his mouth. 'Eat, Little Witch. You're wasting away.' He turns, but before he leaves, he says, 'I let ya down. You have my word, it will never happen again. I'm sorry.' He leaves without another word.

Occasionally, the kids run past as they play their games. Their youthful faces and innocence is a beautiful thing to behold. I never laughed like that. I never played as they do. And it fills me with warmth to know that there are happy children in the world. The more I watch them, the more I know for certain that they've not seen death or felt betrayal. Not like I have. I watch them and share in their innocence from afar. The minutes pass by and I observe the Nomads live their life. They make their dinner and gather around the log seating to eat it together. They're friendly and helpful. No one man does a job without three others offering assistance. A child falls and scrapes a knee, but their tears are dried and their graze kissed better with love and tenderness. The air is filled with laughter and chatter.

It's lovely.

But still, I feel cold and distant. Like a pervert peering in through a window.

Gabriel kneels before me. 'Let's go get cleaned up, yeah?' I nod and he eases me to my feet. We walk across the camp towards a small little wood cabin. Gabriel opens the door and takes me to a lumpy and

musty single bed where I sit heavily. Beneath the window is a cast iron tub. He starts running the tap before helping me undress. He tosses my clothes in the fire and we get in the tub together. In silence, he bathes us both, emptying the bath and refilling it three times before we're finally clean of blood. Moving me like a ragdoll, he dresses me in one of his tops, and together, we get into bed and fall asleep wrapped in each other's arms.



'The footage of the fight at the museum is on every channel.' I choose to keep my eyes closed and my face buried under the scratchy blanket as Grayson speaks to Gabriel. 'As soon as she wakes up, we are to continue looking for the necklace which means you will be looking into her memories again. I need to get the full weight of my magic back and get my Nomads armed with their magic before she gets even more powerful and before we get found.'

'Do you want her to give in to her Break?!' Gabriel hisses furiously. 'Is that what you're trying to achieve? Because if you want her to lose herself, if you want to have a dark, all-powerful witch hell-bent on destruction and vengeance, then please carry on because she's teetering on the edge.'

'As long as I have the Bloodstone, I'm not worried about her darkness. Without her magic, she's nothing. Precisely the reason I made the thing in the first place.'

'I can't believe I ever called you a brother. I look at you now and I feel nothing but hatred and disgust.'

'And I don't care,' Grayson spits back. 'When she wakes up, you will look into her memories. You have seven days to find that necklace, Gabriel. After that, for every day I don't have it, I will remove an extremity that belongs to Amara Jayne, and serve it up to Lilly on a silver platter.'

'You're one sick fuck.'

'And while I'm reminding you of the rules, you keep your relationship to yourself while you are here.'

'Bullshit! We have bigger concerns-'

‘And under no circumstances is Lilly to be left unattended. You, Hendrix, Billy or myself will be stationed either by her side or outside her door at all times. I will not have her snatched by a rogue Nomad or injured.’

‘Then why the hell are we here? We can’t trust anyone. Tobias knew we were at the museum well before we got there.’

‘That is why I had the Nomads travelling with us, dealt with.’

‘Tortured and executed,’ Gabriel corrects.

‘Better safe than sorry,’ Grayson replies, coldly. ‘Someone with us yesterday told Bias where we were going. Now I’ve killed them all, they won’t get another chance to betray me.’

‘We should be on the road. Me, you, Hendrix, Collins and Amara. She needs people she trusts around her. People *we* trust.’

‘You include Hendrix in that list?’

‘He’s kept her safe. He needs her alive and well to achieve his goal of reviving vampires so yeah, I trust that he’ll do whatever it takes to keep her in one piece. And now she’s manifested her Physical magic, she need Collins here to help her learn how to use it properly.’

‘She did just fine without Collins’ help. What she needs to do is find that necklace and prepare for the challenge. We have the ring now, so we will head to Dartmoor in a few days, after she has regained her strength. Lilly has seen what humans think of us now. She’s seen it firsthand. She needs to spend some time with the people whose lives depend on her. Not the soldiers. Not my men at the house. The real Nomads. She won’t give in to her Break, Gabriel, because when she sees what she’s fighting for here, she’ll never give up. I’m surprised that you of all people fail to see her need to protect the innocent.’

‘I don’t fail to see it, Grayson,’ Gabriel snarls back. ‘But I do see that she is fast approaching her limit of what she can deal with.’

‘Then you have no idea who she is. Because she is stronger than you think. More stubborn and far fiercer than even I could have ever expected.’ He walks across the wooden floor towards the door. ‘She chose the wrong brother. I would never doubt her the way you do.’

‘No. You just beat, brand and threaten her.’

‘When you’re trying to cage a lion, you don’t do it with cuddles and cake.’ The door opens and there’s a pause. ‘She can have a day. One day of rest before you start looking for the necklace.’ He slams the door shut as he leaves. I hear Gabriel shuffle before he lowers himself on the edge of the bed.

‘Your brother is a dick,’ I mumble from beneath the blanket.

‘You’re not wrong.’

‘So.’ I remove the blanket and sit up. ‘One day till it all starts again. What do you want to do?’

The corner of his mouth hitches before he pounces on top of me.



As I get dressed, Gabriel goes to find some coffee. As I head out after him, I see Hendrix sitting on the wooden stoop.

‘Awake at last,’ he grunts without turning. ‘Lover-boy’s over there fetching ya breakfast.’

‘Yeah I know.’

‘Course. You have that weird tingly witch locator thing going on.’

‘That. And I have eye balls,’ I quip as I pass, making him chuckle.

The residents of the camp all stop what they’re doing and their eyes follow me as I make my way towards Gabriel. Women pouring coffee overfill their mugs and conversations are paused midway through as they see me.

Of course, I’m not wearing my hood and my hair is a dead giveaway as to who I am. Gabriel is pilling fried food on his plate and doesn’t notice me heading over, or the reaction my appearance has caused.

Three young girls giggle as they run past me. They stop at his side

with wide eyes and enormous smiles. They can't be any older than six. Seven maybe.

'Hello, girls,' he says happily, crouching down so he's eye level with them all. I stop and watch him. 'How are you three today?'

'We're good, Mr Gabriel,' the oldest of the three replies. She has long blonde hair that falls to her waist in waves and light green eyes that look at him with clear admiration.

'What have you got there?' he asks, gesturing to what they each have clasped in their hands.

'We picked them for Miss Hooper,' she says, holding out a fist full of daisies. 'May we give them to her when she wakes up?'

'How did you know that Miss Hooper was here?' he chuckles.

'My mummy heard from Auntie Jella, who was told by Cousin Mal, and he heard it from Monica's best friend Cel, who said her brother Don told her.'

'Wow. That's... that's a lot of people.'

She giggles. 'So, can we give them to her?'

'I think that would make Miss Hooper very happy to be given such pretty flowers by such thoughtful girls. She loves daisies.'

I smile because yes, I do. They're actually my favourite flower, even though Harry called them weeds.

I head over and stand behind him. Their eyes almost pop out of their little heads when they see me. I crouch down beside him. 'Oh wow,' I tell them all, admiring the daisies. 'They are so pretty.'

'T-they're for you,' one of them says, handing them over to me.

Taking them in my hand, I tell her, 'I absolutely love them. You know, when I was little, I would make them into necklaces.'

'Necklaces?' Another of the girls asks. 'How?'

'Would you like me to show you?'

They all nod and sit cross legged in front of me. Their young, hope-filled faces all watch me in utter amazement. I join them, my legs crossed too, as they lay out all the daisies on the ground.

‘Gabriel will help us, won’t you?’

‘Of course I will,’ he replies sincerely, sitting by my side. I show them all how my mum taught me to do it as a child by piercing the stalk with the very tip of my finger nail and sliding a second daisy through. And so on. And so on. They’re completely riveted and keep dashing off to collect more flowers before returning with their horde to make tiaras, bracelets, and necklaces. Watching them all is probably the cutest thing I’ve ever seen in my whole life. Gabriel takes part, letting the girls adorn him with their daisy chains as they giggle and clap. He’s a great sport. Wearing his flowers with a gleeful grin, he listens to everything each youngster has to say. A few others join us. More kids. Boys too. And they all glance at me with the same look of awe.

The smallest, a little girl of five perhaps, sits beside me and twists her finger in my hair.

‘It’s such a pretty colour,’ she tells me. ‘Is it that colour because you’re special?’ She looks up at me. ‘Because you’re the Arcane Witch?’

‘So I’ve been told,’ I tell her, taking the long string of daisies I’ve just finished making into a necklace and sliding it over her head.

‘When I get my magic, will my hair change colour too?’

‘I don’t know,’ I reply, tapping the tip of her nose with my finger. ‘But, when you’re older, you can turn your hair any colour you like. I once saw a girl with bright blue hair.’

She giggles at the idea.

‘Is Mr Grayson your boyfriend?’ she asks.

I glance over and see Gabriel watching us and his good spirits fade in an instant.

‘No,’ I tell her. ‘He’s my Coven Leader. That’s all.’

‘Why aren’t you married?’ she asks.

‘Should I be?’

‘Most girls are at your age.’

‘Ahh well,’ Gabriel says. ‘Not all girls get married. Remember, some choose to dedicate their lives to protecting others. And Lilly has the biggest job of all. She’s going to save us all.’

‘She’s bringing back our magic,’ another girl tells her curious friend. ‘She’s saving us all from Hunters. And that’s much more important than getting married to a smelly boy.’

‘Not all boys are smelly,’ another girl adds. ‘Some smell nice.’

‘No, they don’t. And they always think they’re smarter than us. But they’re not. Boys are dumb.’

Gabriel just watches with an amused grin as the girls talk amongst themselves.

‘Well, when I grow up, I’m not going to marry a boy. I’m going to be a protector like Miss Hooper and have red hair so everyone will know I’m there to save them.’

‘Like a superhero,’ Gabriel adds with a firm nod.

‘Yeah,’ she says confidently. ‘When I grow up, I’m going to be a superhero.’ She looks at me. ‘Just like you.’

‘You know,’ Gabriel tells her. ‘You can be a superhero and love someone too. You don’t have to choose.’

‘But we can’t marry and protect the coven,’ says the older girl.

‘Who says?’ I scoff.

‘Mr Grayson,’ she replies.

‘Well, Mr Grayson is wrong. Isn’t he, Gabriel?’ He looks me in the eye. ‘We can love anyone we want. Any way we want. No-one can tell anyone who they can be with. Even if sometimes it’s hard, or sad, or

scary, love is always worth it. For the right person.'

'For the right person,' he agrees, 'Yeah. It's worth anything.'

'If you do get married one day,' the little one beside me asks. 'Can I be your bridesmaid?'

'Maybe,' I laugh.

'When you have a baby, will they have red hair too?'

I feel my face fall and I wonder for the briefest second, would the baby I lost have had red hair? Would she have had a sweet smile like hers? Would she have enjoyed making daisy chains with me too?

'Would you look at the time?' Gabriel exclaims, getting to his feet and sliding off all his daisy chains. He pulls me up with him. 'We have to go, girls. I'm sorry.' They all give a loud and over the top groan. 'But we'll see you all at dinner later tonight. Be good, you hear?'

'Yes, Mr Gabriel,' they call after us as we leave.

Gabriel scoops up a black backpack and tosses it over his shoulder.

'What's that?' I ask.

'Supplies,' he replies. 'For our day-off. You alright?'

'I'm fine. They're really sweet.'

'Yeah. They are,' he agrees, his arm wrapping around my waist. But I have to lower it.

'You know we're supposed to be a secret,' I remind him. Good job too. Ahead of us, Grayson appears from a large cabin and he's surrounded by men. Billy, Hendrix, Connor and several Nomads I recognise from the house, are all listening to every single word he says. Connor spots me and gives me an enthusiastic wave which I return. 'I wonder what that's all about?'

'Grayson's getting everything organised for when we go to the stone in Dartmoor,' he tells me. 'Now we have the ring, it's full-steam ahead.'

Grayson watches our every move. As he slides his hands into his pockets, I see his eye twitch. Probably for no other reason than to see us standing next to each other.

‘Is he bringing Amara and Collins home?’ I ask. ‘Now I’ve manifested my Physical magic?’

‘He says no. But I’m working on it.’

‘Don’t.’ He looks at me confused. ‘He can’t use them against me if they’re not here. They’re safer where they are.’

‘I’m going to get them back to us. It’s important that they be here.’

‘So Collins can teach me about my Physical magic?’

‘Yeah...’ he mumbles half-heartedly. ‘So he can teach you about your Physical magic. Come on, Beautiful. We’re wasting daylight.’ He starts to walk off, urging me to follow. ‘C’mon then.’

‘Where are you going?’ Grayson asks dryly as we pass him.

‘For a walk,’ Gabriel replies. ‘One day, remember?’

We walk away and after a few moments, Gabriel leans down and picks me up. I press my thighs around his waist and cling to his neck.

‘We’re out of sight. And the only person I care about is right here. The only woman I want to kiss. Touch. Laugh with and make love to, is you. No one else. Never again,’ he tells me, my hair falling over both our faces as I look down at him. ‘I spent five-hundred years trying to make a real connection with someone. And I never could. Because I was waiting for you.’

‘The Arcane?’

‘No,’ he tuts. ‘Like I give a fuck about you being the Arcane. Love, Lilly Hooper. I love you! Not your magic. Actually, I think I love you in spite of your magic. Just think how much easier all this would be if we were normal Descendants. No magic. No cosmic destiny. God, I would love a normal life with you. Seeing you on our patio in your comfy clothes, cup of tea on the table and a note book in your hands while you scribble down your notes.’

‘Notes?’

‘Oh yeah. Totally see you as a writer. Coming up with twisted tales like the ones in your Grimm’s fairytale book. And I’ll watch you for hours, just writing. A dog sat by my knees and a cat curled up on your lap. A house by the sea so we can hear the sound of the waves and watch the storms on the cliffs. Perfect.’ I lean down and kiss him hard. My hands are in his hair and my legs tighten around his middle at his perfect words.



‘What the hell is that?’ I laugh, as Gabriel presents me with a huge rubber tyre hanging from a tree by a long length of blue rope. The Nomad guards assigned to us are keeping their distance but we both feel their presence. Even though we try and ignore it.

‘Come here, and I’ll show you.’

He scoops me up, guides me inside and starts to push. I go pretty damn high and whoop as I fly.

‘It’s a tyre swing,’ he laughs. ‘I made it for the kids a few years back. Fun, huh?’

‘It is. It really is!’ I giggle as he swings me higher and higher.

He tells me to lean back and he carries on pushing me as I look up at the canopy above. The sun streaks through the leaves as they gently move in the breeze. My hair trails behind me on the ground. The smell of the forest floor ignites a sense of nostalgia I can’t quite place. But it’s a lovely feeling. And with each swing, I return to Gabriel, who looks down at me with contentment. Just, happiness and calmness clear on his features. We don’t need to talk. We don’t need to fill the silence. In fact, the silence makes it all the better. Just us. Being.

After a while, we sit on a blanket under a big oak tree and he opens up the black bag he brought with us. It’s a picnic, and my book. With his back leaning against the base of the tree and my head on his outstretched legs, we spend an hour or more eating sandwiches and cookies while he reads to me. I love how he runs his fingers through my hair. How he lightly brushes his hands along my arms. How it leaves behind a trail of goose bumps every single time. How he smells.

How he glances at me as he reads, just to make sure I'm alright. That I'm enjoying his telling of my favourite stories. As he reads Cinderella, he acts horrified at the gory bits, teasing me for loving such a gruesome tale. But he does this every time. And I'm sure he does because of how I giggle at his reaction. As the afternoon continues, we find a small clearing in the canopy and lay on our backs to watch the clouds.

‘An apple,’ I tell him, pointing to the shape high above.

‘No. A heart,’ he insists, with a teasing grin. ‘Definitely a heart.’

‘What kind of heart looks like that?’

‘What kind of apple looks like that?’ he scoffs happily, entwining his fingers in mine.

With an eye roll, I look back up at the sky.

‘A tulip.’

‘Where?’

I reach up and point, his face is close to mine so he can see exactly where I am gesturing to.

‘No. Wrong again. A pinecone.’

‘What?’ I shake my head. ‘You’re crazy.’

‘What about that one?’ he asks, lifting our linked hands together and pointing to a cloud above us. ‘What do you think that one looks like?’

‘Erm... A rabbit?’ I squint but can’t really see anything. ‘A pineapple, maybe?’

‘Close your eyes,’ he says. ‘You’ve been looking at them for too long. Reboot your brain for a minute.’

I close my eyes and when I do, he leans over and starts gently kissing my neck. His warm lips and the cool breeze is utter bliss.

‘I love you,’ he whispers, his soft kisses making me tingle. I move

my head to kiss him, but he guides my face back so I'm facing the sky. 'Keep your eyes closed,' he tells me. 'Your brain is rebooting. Remember?'

'Okay.'

He kisses my hand. The tip of my nose. My cheeks. My lips. And then he goes still and quiet. His hand is still gripping onto mine.

'Gabriel? What are you doing?'

'When I say, I want you to open your eyes, and tell me what you see.'

'Okay.'

'On three,'

'Okay.'

'One, two, three.'

I open my eyes. It's a little blurry as I get used to the sun once more so I blink everything back into focus. But it's not clouds that I'm looking at.

'What do you see?' he asks, as I continue looking up at the ring he has between his thumb and forefinger.

'Gabriel...' I whisper, turning to look at him. 'What are-'

'I can tell you what I see.' He lowers his hand so the ring is between us. 'I see a ring that was given to me by my mum. A ring that she had made for me for one reason. You see this?' He shows me the stone. 'It's a blue sapphire. The shade matches my eyes perfectly. And the white gold setting is made from my great grand-mother's wedding band. It's a tradition in our coven. Mothers give their sons the ring they will give to the woman they love. The woman they want to spend the rest of their lives with. The woman they want to marry.'

'Gabriel...' I sit up and so does he. 'W-what are you doing?'

'Lilly, I love you so much. More than anything in this world. And I know that the days lying ahead are going to be hard and scary. That

there are hurdles for us to overcome.'

'Just a few,' I whisper in shock. 'Gabriel, I'm-'

'But I want to face them all with you,' he interrupts. 'Every single one.' He holds up the sparkling ring. His eyes are shining just as bright. And they really do match. Perfectly. 'Lilly Hooper. Will you marry me?'

I never thought my heart could thump so fast. That my mouth could dry out so much. And as much as I want to say yes, the word won't come out and his smile falters.

'You're going to say no, aren't you? Is it because of my past? The girls? Is it Toby?'

'No. It's not any of that. It's... It's...' I look from the ring to him. 'Is this your way of trying to make sure I don't give into the Break?'

'I want to marry because I love you. Completely. I think of my life without you? I see nothing. Not a thing.'

'We can say my baggage is in the past, but who are we kidding? My baggage is trying to kill us.'

'I don't care about any of that.'

'I'm a mess, Gabriel. A real mess. Why the hell would you *want* to marry *me*?'

'Because I'm not alive when I'm not with you. And I want to live. I want to live with you. I want to wake up with you in my bed and fall asleep with you in my arms. I want to make a home with you. I want us to fight, make love, have fun and be with you for the rest of my life. Marry me, Lilly?' He shuffles closer, his nose resting against mine and in a whisper, he asks one more time. 'Will you make me the happiest man in the whole world, and agree to spend the rest of your life with me? Marry me?' My silence has him closing his eyes and slumping a little.

'Yes,' I tell him. His eyes flick open to see me grinning from ear to ear.

'What did you say?'

‘I said yes, Gabriel Kendryk. Yes, I will marry you.’

‘Y-you will?’ he stammers, looking stunned. ‘You really want to?’

‘Yes!’ I laugh. ‘Of course I want to, you idiot. I’d die without you. I just wanted to make sure you really wanted to. That *you* were sure.’

‘I’m sure. I’m so sure!’ He gets up on his knees, almost vibrating with excitement. ‘You’ll marry me? Really?’

I get on my knees too and rest my palms flat on his cheeks, squishing his grinning cheeks together.

‘Yes. I will marry you.’ I simply cannot stop smiling. ‘I will absofuckinglutely marry you!’

With trembling hands, he slides the ring on my finger. It fits perfectly and seeing it there makes him puff out his cheeks.

‘Bloody hell,’ he breathes. ‘You said yes,’ he realises, looking at the ring sitting on my finger. His eyes suddenly flick up to mine. ‘You said yes! We’re getting married?’

‘I said yes,’ I laugh. ‘We’re getting married!’

‘SHE SAID YES! SHE BLOODY SAID YES! WE’RE GETTING MARRIED!’

‘Shhh!’ I giggle. But he’s on his feet, scooping me up and spinning me around in a circle whooping and laughing with joy. He lowers my feet back to the ground and looks down at me. I have never seen so much excitement in another’s eyes. I’ve never been so happy myself.

‘I’m going to be the best husband to you. Just wait and see,’ he tells me. ‘Just you wait.’

‘I don’t need to wait and see. You’re already the best thing that could have ever happened to me. God, I wish I could make love to you right now.’

He lands me with a kiss, pushing me down onto my back. ‘Your wish is my command, future wife.’

The rest of the day is a blur of bliss. His arms are always around me, like he can't keep me close enough. And I'm no better. His face shows me nothing but joy. His eyes shine with happiness and his words are full of playfulness and love. There's no mention of the spell. No worries of everything that awaits us beyond our day. Of the chaos going on beyond the Nomad camp. Everyone else disappears. Everything else. All there is, is us, the sky, the trees, our future. We talk about our wedding.

'I want to keep it small,' I tell him. 'Just our friends. And none of our real family.'

'Oh shame. I was going to ask Grayson to be my best man,' he says with a comical eye roll. 'A wiccan wedding is really beautiful. There hasn't been a real one for over five-hundred years.'

'Wiccan wedding?'

'In a witches wedding ceremony, we link our magic and swear that we'll never do harm to each other. It ties us together spiritually and marks us.'

'Marks us?'

'Our magic kind of seeps into each other and marks our ring finger with a unique pattern. Like a ring. When Collins's niece got married all those years ago, she said it felt like washing away everything old and nasty, and replacing it with something fresh and hopeful. She felt how much she was loved and that made her love him even more. Collins actually married them. Any witch can marry another witch but it's best if someone who loves you and cares about you does it. Makes the bond stronger. You make promises to each other, and put forward your offer. Like... will you let me share my secrets with you... or... will you let me love you for the rest of your life? That sort of thing.'

'We should ask Collins to marry us.' I lay my head on his chest as he kisses the crown of my head. 'It all sounds so perfect. I wish that Amara and Collins were here. She would be so excited for us.'

'They'll be back soon. I'll make sure of it.'

'If they're here, Grayson can hurt them.'

‘He can hurt them no matter where they are. No, we need them here. It’s really important.’ He leans in closer and lowers his voice. ‘Things are in motion.’

‘Things? What things?’

‘If you trust me, just do as I say over the next few days and I promise you, everything will be okay. We’ll get our friends back and everything will be okay but you must, must trust me and not ask me anything more about it. Can you do that?’

‘If I know, maybe I can help.’

‘If you know, that makes you accountable. Just trust me, okay?’

I nod, sealing my lips together as anxious wasps start buzzing inside my belly. What is he going to do?

‘But first things first. We have a party to get to. Remember, no matter what happens, trust me. And go with it, okay?’

‘Sure,’ I sigh. ‘Why not.’



The sun has almost set and the camp looks very different when we return. There are small fires lit here and there with pots and pans suspended over the flames. The air smells of delicious food, it makes my stomach rumble. There’s a large fire in the very centre of the camp and that’s where most of the Nomads seem to have congregated. Long logs have been laid down to be used as benches. A few of the women are busy cooking and making sure everyone has drinks, as the children sit with marshmallows on sticks by the fire. Most of them have daisy chains dangling around their necks. A huddle of five men and two women are fiddling with instruments, and perched on one of the logs, all alone, is Connor with his head stuck in a book.

‘Connor!’ I bellow across the camp, making everyone stop what they’re doing and watch in stunned silence as I wave enthusiastically. Connor lifts his head, beams at me and runs over. We share a hug. I’m so thrilled and relieved to see him.

‘How’s it goin’?’ he asks, squeezing me tightly. ‘Are yer alright?’

‘Better now I’ve seen you. What’s happening? And why is everyone starring at us?’

He loosens his hold on me and tells me, ‘They’re putting on a show for yer. A kind of party. The Arcane Witch at their camp? They’re gonna celebrate.’

‘LILLY!’ I turn and see Grayson beckoning me over, wagging his finger like I’m a dog.

‘I’ll be right back,’ I sigh, heading over to Grayson. I do my best to ignore the glaring the brothers share. ‘What can I do for you, Grayson?’ I ask when I reach him.

‘You’re staying by my side tonight,’ he orders. ‘The Nomads and I are going through a lot of effort to make you feel welcomed and relaxed here and I won’t have you cut yourself off with your little gang over there.’

‘But-’

‘Argue with me,’ he warns, leaning down. ‘I dare you.’

His eyes bore into me. I nod, knowing there’s no point in arguing.

‘Good girl. Now, be a sweet thing and pop into your cabin. I’ve left out a dress for you to wear.’

‘What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?’ I ask, looking down at the plain grey t-shirt, baggy jeans and my usual elbow-length fingerless gloves, which I’ve made sure covers the engagement ring currently sitting on my left hand.

‘You look like a tramp.’

‘Everyone looks like a tramp,’ I argue. ‘Because we are tramps.’

‘The girls don’t,’ he corrects me, nodding to a group of young women gathered across the way. They look stunning. Dresses. Heels. Perfectly curled hair and flawless makeup. And a few of them are making eyes at Gabriel which makes me laugh.

‘I don’t care what they look like. I’m happy in what I’m wearing. Plus, I don’t see the men dressed up.’

‘I won’t have my Arcane looking like a destitute. Hendrix, take Miss Hooper to her cabin so she can change. And if she refuses, strip her down and dress her yourself, would you?’

‘Yes boss,’ he replies. ‘Come on, Little Witch. This is an argument ya ain’t gonna win.’



Wearing a beautiful gown made of red silk that comes to a stop just above my knee with a layer of chiffon trailing to the floor, I return to a very lively and bustling scene. It’s a lovely dress to be fair. I wouldn’t have thought Grayson would have chosen it at all. I’ve turned the ring upside down so the stone is hidden, and I hold it tightly in my palm. The music is in full swing. It travels through the air, as does everyone’s joyful chatter. There must be over a hundred people here. Eating. Drinking. Standing. Sitting. Singing. Laughing. It’s lovely. In the crowd, I spot Gabriel with Connor and a few other people I don’t recognise.

‘You okay?’ Gabriel mouths. I nod and show him a smile, gesturing to the dress and giving him a little twirl. ‘You look stunning,’ he adds, giving me a thumbs up. His smile disappears and I know it’s because Grayson has started to make his way over.

‘What are you wearing?’ he asks, handing me a glass of wine.

‘What you left out for me.’

‘That’s not what I left out for you.’ He looks over at Gabriel who looks a little smug. *He* left it out. ‘I suppose you look presentable enough,’ he groans, resting his hand on the base of my back.

Making sure I keep on my smile, I tell him, ‘Take your hand off me.’

‘No,’ he grins back. ‘I’ve had an idea.’

‘Did it hurt?’ I ask, handing my untouched wine to a passerby. No way I’m drinking anything he gives me.

‘You are funny, Miss Hooper. And no. It didn’t hurt. Not me at any rate. I’ve decided that in order to show a united front against our enemies, to inspire confidence in the Nomads and to make sure that everyone knows that you are fully protected by me, you and I will present as a couple.’

My insides run cold as I stare at him lost for words.

‘Of course, it’s only in public,’ he adds. ‘Behind closed doors, you and Gabriel may continue being whatever it is you two are.’

Engaged.

‘No,’ I almost plead, because in actual fact, if that’s what he wants to do, there’s nothing I can do about it.

‘No, you don’t want to continue with Gabriel?’ he asks, knowing full well that’s not what I mean at all. He turns me to face him, his hand settling on my hip. ‘The deal was that behind closed doors, you can be what you like together. As long as it doesn’t interfere with me, the coven or the spell, I don’t particularly care. However, in every other respect, you belong to me. Your magic. Your safety and your obedience are mine.’ He looks so conceited as he tells me his plans. ‘It will throw off the girls too,’ he adds. ‘They can carry on thinking that Gabriel is free and single so none of them will give you any trouble.’

‘You think I can’t handle some jealous girls?’ My outburst makes him twitch and I feel a short sharp burst of his lightning on my hip. I flinch and jump back but he grabs my arm and holds me in place, all the while keeping his fake smile. To anyone else, it looks like we’re having a pleasant conversation. But nothing with Grayson is ever pleasant.

‘Do you need reminding of our deal?’ he warns. ‘Because one word from me and I’ll have Amara taken to pieces. You will talk to me with respect. You will do as I order you to do. And you will smile as you do it.’

‘I don’t need reminding, Grayson. I’m doing everything you want, and in exchange, I get Gabriel and he gets me. And everyone is safe. You can’t demand for me to pretend to be your girlfriend. If nothing else, it’s pathetic.’

He leans in and pecks my cheek. But when he speaks it's with venom. 'Last time Theo discovered your relationship, he used my brother to lure you into a trap and made him watch as he hacked little pieces off you.' He nods to a gaggle of girls. 'He's slept with all of them. They all love him, you know. And for a while, he loved them too.'

'You just want to get between us. Well, you can't. And you won't.' I yank my hand free. 'Just because we're staying quiet doesn't mean you get to put your grubby hands all over me and call me yours. How about you pour your energy into the spell rather than your useless and sad attempts at trying to break us up.'

I look over to Gabriel who is on his feet, mid-conversation with a couple of Nomads I don't recognise. They're not the ones who've been to the house. They look about his age and seem very friendly. But whatever it is they have said has Gabriel frowning and looking in our direction.

'Excuse me, Miss Hooper?' A woman in her early forties says kindly, approaching us in a bow and speaking with the upmost respect. 'I am very sorry to disrupt. But I simply had to talk to you.'

'You did?'

'Yes. I wanted to give you my thanks.' She points to two young men standing close to the table with the food. 'My sons are over there. Sid and Josh. They were at the Traitor camp a few months back. They were among the volunteers that came to rescue you and Mr Kendryk.'

'Oh, I'll be sure to thank them.'

'No. No please, it's me that owes you thanks. Sid was injured and a Traitor was about to finish him off when you intervened and saved him. I would have lost my youngest boy if it wasn't for you.' She takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. 'You saved my children that day.'

'To be fair, they wouldn't have needed saving if it wasn't for me.'

'Oh no, Miss Hooper. You couldn't be more wrong. Without you, we're all as good as dead. You are the one that will save us all.' She gives another small bow, both to Grayson and I. 'Thank you. If there is ever anything I can do for you, please, please let me know. You have our gratitude and our loyalty, Miss Hooper.'

‘Did you stage that?’ I accuse as she leaves.

‘No,’ he replies, sipping his whiskey. ‘Look around you, Lilly.’ He points to the many men and woman surrounding us. To the children toasting marshmallows and dancing to the music. ‘These people have had to hide from the day they were born. And because of you, soon the hiding will end. And we can finally be free.’ He looks behind me, and another woman approaches. She tells me her son was also at the camp. And that I saved his life too. She’s followed by a man who tells me his grandson was only fifteen when he was caught, tortured and executed by Hunters three years ago.

Fifteen!

And that he wishes he had lived long enough to see the revolution. The hours pass and I’m led from group to group, listening to anecdotes, being introduced to people who look at me with wide eyes, and every single one bows and shows me complete respect. They’re not like the Nomads who carry the guns. They’re... nice! Normal. Sweet and funny. Grayson insists his hand stays on my back as he guides me from place to place. I hate the feel of his hand on me. I hate how he enjoys it. And when a brunette slides her hand down Gabriel’s arm, I have to fight the urge to throw her off. Gabriel swiftly removes it and steps away before turning his back on the girls altogether, and talks to Connor instead. Grayson’s arm snakes around my waist. I can’t hide the shudder.

‘Lilly, everyone here adores you.’ He turns me so we’re face to face and he pulls me flush against his body. ‘I adore you,’ he whispers. Only now do I realise he’s had a bit too much to drink. He leans in, his mouth going for mine. Before I can slap him, a voice bellows across the camp.

‘CAN I GET EVERYONE’S ATTENTION PLEASE?’ Gabriel suddenly calls out into the crowd. Grayson remains holding me but stops his attempt to kiss me.

Gabriel is watching us both. His eyes are narrowed, but he has the lightest smile pulling at his lips. Grayson releases me. The Nomads fall silent and all eyes turn to Gabriel. Grayson heads forwards with the intention of intervening, but Gabriel carries on talking, so he lingers at the side so as to not look foolish. Connor takes his place beside me to watch.

‘I just wanted to say, thank you.’ Gabriel looks around at them all with extreme humility. ‘Thank you so much for taking us in and looking after us with such short notice. As you know, we lost The Orchard. As well as some very good men.’ The crowd all murmur, shaking their heads and cursing Theo’s name. ‘I know. I know. The whole thing is made so much worse by the fact that it was one of our own that attacked us.’ He looks to Grayson solemnly. ‘Our own father, nonetheless.’ He shakes his head, giving them all a chance to say a few words on the subject of betrayal and villainy. ‘The reason they attacked us was simple. They know that we seek our freedom. They know that we have had enough of hiding in the shadows and cowering from the world. They know that our time has come to stand tall. To claim our freedom. Our magic. To be what we were born to be. Witches!’ The crowd cheers. They clap and whoop at the word. ‘Five-hundred years we’ve been hunted. Tortured. Murdered. Not only by those beasts that call themselves Witch Hunters, but by our own kind who have turned their back on their powers and given way to fear and oppression. They hope that by renouncing what they are, they will be spared. They’re wrong. Five-hundred years, Descendants have lived without magic. And we are *all* still being executed because of what we are. We have all lost people we love,’ he adds. The crowd goes deadly silent. ‘Let’s not forget what happened to the Camp on the Isle of Mull.’

‘What happened?’ I ask Connor in a whisper.

‘Three years back. Hunters found it. Torched it. Along with everyone inside,’ he tells me sadly, coughing to clear the lump that has formed in his throat. ‘Flew overhead and doused them in petrol. Took three days for the flames to die out. It was a bigger camp than here.’

‘Christ!’ I gasp. That is truly horrific.

‘Three-hundred and fifteen souls. Gone.’ Gabriel clicks his fingers. ‘Just like that,’ he says with a distinct strain in his voice. ‘And of course, the destruction of our centre in Kerry, Ireland.’ He looks straight at Connor. ‘We lost a lot of good people that day. Sweet children.’

Connor lowers his gaze.

‘What happened?’ I ask in a whisper.

'Six years ago, my parents ran a school for the children who wanted to train up as doctors, academics, politicians. That sort of thing. Hunters found us. My parents and I got some of the kids out.' His fingers linger on the scarring that marks his neck. 'Not enough. Not by a long shot. My parents died in their efforts to save them.'

'Oh, Connor.' I lean over and kiss his shoulder while gripping his hand tight. 'I'm so sorry.'

'We have suffered too much loss for far too long,' Gabriel says. 'And one of us has suffered much more than most.' He gestures to me and I feel myself redden in a second. My body goes heavy as I'm doused head to toe in dread. 'You have all heard of our newest member of the coven. Miss Lilly Hooper.' All eyes turn to me.

What the hell is he doing? Is this part of his plan to get us out of here?

'You have all had a lot of questions about the very sudden appearance of the Arcane Witch. And rightly so. After all, she is in her early twenties and has only just made herself known to us. Where has she been all this time? Well, it is only right that you learn a little bit more about her.'

'Connor, please tell me I'm having a nightmare,' I whisper. Especially as Grayson's entire demeanor screams anger and wrath as he watches his brother enthrall hundreds.

'I wish I could,' Connor replies. 'But this is really happening.'

'For the past fifteen-years, Lilly Hooper, your Arcane, has been a prisoner. She was in chains when we found her.' The murmurs increase as I keep my eyes on him. And he keeps his eyes on me. 'Fifteen-years. Locked up. Beaten. Starved. Tormented.' The crowd gasps. The women cover their mouths as the men shake their head in disgust.

'Hunters had her?' Someone asks.

'Theo?' Another voice calls.

'No,' Gabriel says. 'Her uncle. Her own flesh and blood. A man who despised our kind and feared her power. A man who would beat her to the point where it scarred her body and left her with a fear of touch.'

I can't help the betrayal showing as he spills my story to the ears of hundreds of strangers.

'Now, there are some things that I believe you should know. Painful and frightening things.' He takes a deep breath. 'The world knows that witches are here. And they know that we mean to return magic.'

There's a collective gasp throughout the crowd. Mothers and fathers hold their children closer. Couples hug tighter.

'There have been several attacks made by Hunters. Humans have been killed in their efforts to catch and kill us. And they are blaming it all on us. But know that we have not hurt anyone. No innocents have died by our hands. But the news is spreading and the outside world is no longer safe for any of us to venture into. Hunters are here. More come to England every day. Our faces are all over the news and humanity is afraid. Which means they are unstable and unpredictable. They are violent.'

Everyone looks terrified. People have started crying.

'Lilly's their number one target. They want to take away our one and only chance to free our people. To rob us of our right to exist. Hunters want to kill a girl who has suffered for fifteen-years at the hands of her own family. A girl who risked her life over and over to save us. To save each and every one of you. When Theo came to kill us, she risked her life to save ours. When told that the spell to lower the Veil was dangerous, she didn't flinch. She has faced danger again and again, all in the name of saving us.' He points to the crowd. 'Saving you. Your children. Your spouses and parents. And she will never stop. Never! And neither will I. We will not fail you, but we need you to be strong and brave. To help us. Can you do that?'

They start to nod at his words.

'Too long we have hidden. Too long we have mourned the cruel deaths of those we love. It ends. It ends now!'

They start murmuring their support.

'Tell me, do you want to be free? Free from the threat of execution?'

‘YES!’ The crowd cheers.

‘Free from the threat of captivity?’

‘YES!’

‘Free to be what we were born to be?’

‘YES!’

‘DO YOU WANT YOUR MAGIC BACK?’

‘YES!!’ They roar and cheer, throwing up fists and pounding on their chests, looking at me with a fierce loyalty.

‘WILL WE LET THOSE WHO HAVE HUNTED US, KILLED US, TORTURED US, TAKE AWAY OUR ONLY CHANCE AT SURVIVAL?’

‘NO!’ They all roar.

‘WILL WE JUST LIE DOWN AND DIE? GIVE OURSELVES OVER TO THE HUNTERS LIKE SHEEP TO THE SLAUGHTER? OR WILL YOU FIGHT?’ Gabriel bellows at the crowd.

‘FIGHT!’ They all yell back.

‘IF ANYONE. I MEAN... ANYONE...’ His gaze settles on Grayson, and the corner of his mouth twitches in a stifled grin. ‘TRIES TO HURT HER, OR STOP HER FROM RETURNING MAGIC, WE WILL CUT THEM DOWN WHERE THEY STAND. YES?’

They roar like an army of ancient warriors.

‘He’s making sure that Grayson can’t hurt you without getting them angry,’ Connor whispers. This stunt is too dangerous. He may be securing my safety. But certainly not anyone else’s. Gabriel raises his hands and the crowd settles.

‘Tomorrow, Lilly will light the way to our salvation. It will take every ounce of strength she has. Every bit of courage. It will hurt. It will be frightening. It will be dangerous. So, while she puts her all into the spell that will bring down the Veil and reunite you all with your magic, it is our duty to protect her so she can focus on the challenges that lie ahead. Challenges that will threaten her safety and her life,

make no mistake. Will you stand with me and protect her from anyone that would wish her harm?’

‘YES, SIR!’ They cry.

Gabriel looks straight at me and gestures for me to join him. Connor gives my shoulder a nudge, spurring me to move. As I walk, the silence is almost deafening. He has them absolutely riveted. As I stand before him, he smiles.

‘Are you insane?’ I whisper.

He gives a small, soft laugh before saying his next bit. ‘It must come of no surprise to you all, that I have become very fond of Miss Hooper. As has anyone else that has been lucky enough to meet her.’

The crowd cheers and the children whoop.

He looks right as his brother who has adopted that empty smile. The one that doesn’t reach his eyes.

‘I want to share with you all the news. To let you see that it is not simply me asking you to risk your lives while we sit back and watch. I assure you, I will be up front and centre in any battle we face. Because we are not just protecting a stranger. We are protecting family.’ He takes my hand, spins the ring around and holds it up into the air. ‘It is my absolute privilege to announce to you all, that earlier this morning, Lilly Hooper agreed to be my wife!’

The crowd simply explodes in applause and joyful bellows. All hands raise high in the air. Feet stomp in the ground. Connor is jumping up and down, clapping in utter joy.

Not Grayson though.

Gabriel rests his palm against my cheek and beams at me, pulling my attention away from them and back to him.

‘SO, BROTHERS,’ he calls out to the crowd. ‘SISTERS! FRIENDS! WILL YOU STAND WITH LILLY AND ME? WILL YOU HELP US RETURN MAGIC TO THE MODERN WORLD AND SAVE WITCHES FROM EXTINCTION?’

The intensity triples. The ground shakes. They start chanting our

names.

Li-lly! Gab-ri-el! Li-lly! Gab-ri-el!

Grayson watches them, his name is not mentioned once, and he looks ready to kill us there and then. The music starts and everyone goes into full party mode around us.

‘Grayson won’t let you get away with this, Gabriel. What have you done?’

‘Trust me,’ Gabriel whispers, as he leans down to kiss me. ‘Please, just trust me. Okay?’

‘I trust you,’ I reply, kissing him back.

The party is still raging outside. But inside our cabin, the atmosphere is far from jovial. Grayson is standing with his hands in his pockets as Gabriel stands firmly by my side with his arm holding my waist. Hendrix and Billy linger by the door but we're both just focusing on Grayson.

'One call. That's all it would take for me to end Amara's life.'

'You think I didn't know what you were planning?' Gabriel retorts. 'I've had people coming up to me all evening asking about you two. They were clearly under the impression you two were romantically involved. I went to your cabin and imagine my surprise when I saw the box you kept the ring mother made you open and empty on your table.'

I look at Grayson and Gabriel both in turn.

Gabriel looks down at me. 'He was going to publicly ask you to marry him tonight.'

The sharp burst of laughter I produce isn't shared with a single other person. They both look ready to kill each other.

'Hold on.' My head is turning side to side as it sinks in. I settle on Grayson. 'You can't be serious? Were you going to ask me to marry you?'

He doesn't say a word. But the expression he wears tells me he was.

'You were going to force me to marry you?' Now, I'm not laughing. I grip onto Gabriel tighter and fill with gratitude at his performance earlier. 'How dare you.'

'So you got engaged to prove a point?' Grayson asks Gabriel, ignoring me.

'I saw your ring while you were showing her off. We got engaged

this morning. Because we love each other. Unlike you, who was going to propose to claim her as property.'

'Careful, little brother. You forget what's at stake.'

'And so do you. If I go out there and tell them all what you did to her, that you branded the Arcane, you'll have a goddamn mob out for your blood.'

'And if I think for even a second that you would dare go out there and tell them that, I *will* have Amara's head cut off. And your future wife will watch as I carve you up and serve bits of you up to her on a plate,' he spits with venom. 'Do you hear me?'

I grip onto him tighter, hoping that he won't say another word. They continue to glare in silence.

'I have a deal to put forward. A truce, of sorts,' Gabriel says. I watch him and try my best to look like I know what the hell is going on.

'Go on then. What's your "Deal"?'

'Once the spell is done, we agree that we will stay involved in your coven for as long as it takes to secure our peoples safety and freedom. Willingly. With conditions.'

'I will not hand over her Bloodstone. No way.'

'Our conditions are that we want Amara and Collins back. Safe and unharmed. Immediately. She wants her best friend back and I want Collins here to teach Lilly how to heal others and herself properly. You know as well as I do that having her skilled at healing is advantageous. We also want to do the first stone as soon as possible. Lilly doesn't want to wait for more bodies to pile up. And thirdly, Lilly will get her Bloodstone back-'

'No.' Grayson shakes his head. 'No deal. No way.'

'What will persuade you to hand over her Bloodstone?'

Grayson looks between us, grinding his teeth. 'A child,' he responds. 'I want her to give me a child. Then, and only then, will I give her back her Bloodstone.'

We're back to that. I inwardly groan because I know that that's never going to-

'Fine.' Gabriel's agreement is a punch to the gut. 'One child. After the spell is done and we are safe from Hunters.' Gabriel looks straight at me. My mouth is open and a betrayed frown has etched over my face.

'You can't be serious.'

'I am. If it means your freedom and safety, I am *absolutely*, serious.' He draws out the word *absolutely*. It's our code-word. When something isn't as it seems. When there is danger and lies surrounding us.

'Lilly?' Grayson asks. 'Do you agree to those terms?'

I'm at a loss for words. Gabriel raises his eye brows expectantly.

'Y-yes,' I stutter. 'I agree.'

'Great. Do we have a deal?' Gabriel holds out his hand and waits. 'Let's put this pettiness aside. You do not need to threaten us. We want to stay and Lilly wants to save those people out there. Nothing negative can come from having our friends back. This way, everyone is happy. Agree to it, Grayson, and put your energies into saving thousands of lives instead of ruining ours because your pride has been hurt. What do you say?'

Gabriel keeps his hand outstretched.

Grayson slides his hand into Gabriel's and they shake. I hadn't realised I was holding my breath until the moment I let it out.

'But know this, if you betray me... I will end you all.' Grayson warns. 'You still do as I say, when I say it. The only thing that's changed, up until that Veil is down, is that you two are public and you will have your friends back. One foot out of line, you will regret bringing them home.'

'Understood.'

They shake hands. A little violently.

‘Congratulations on the engagement,’ he says hatefully, gripping his hand so tight, Gabriel’s knuckles go white.

‘Thanks,’ he replies coolly, prizing his hand back.

‘It will never last. She can’t love anyone. Not really. Not after Toby. And you, you couldn’t be faithful if your life depended on it.’ He laughs at us and turns to leave. ‘I look forward to watching you both crash and burn in your pathetic excuse of a relationship, and then watching as Lilly falls in love with me instead.’

‘And I look forward to marrying Gabriel and living every single day not giving a shit about proving a single thing to you,’ I tell him. He stops and turns. Why can’t I keep my fucking mouth shut? His eyes threaten me just enough that he doesn’t need to say a word. And then, he sends a stream of lightning straight to Gabriel. I run to stand between them, but with a wave of his hand, I’m sent to the other side of the cabin and land in a heap on the floor. He continues his torture as I scramble to my feet. He tosses me back again with a wave of his hand.

‘I KEEP TELLING YOU. BEHAVE, OR THE ONES YOU LOVE WILL PAY THE PRICE,’ he roars angrily. He releases Gabriel from his torture and straightens his cuffs while breathing heavily. He’s so angry. He’s almost shaking with rage. We’ve backed him into a corner. ‘You’re like a stubborn bitch that refuses to come to heel.’

‘I may be an untrainable bitch, but you’re a rabid dog with serious anger issues.’

He charges forwards and raises his fist. No one is more surprised than me when Hendrix grabs his wrist and throws him aside before casually standing in front of me as a blockade.

‘What in the hell do you think you are doing, Hendrix?’

‘Sorry, Boss.’ He shrugs. ‘I’m done watching you beat the kid. And besides, you ordered me to keep her alive and in one piece. You, caving her skull in, would mean me failing in my duties, and you don’t take failure.’

I swiftly run to Gabriel and help him to sit as Hendrix stands between us looking so calm, I wonder if he’s completely insane.

‘Move aside, Hendrix.’

‘No-can-do, Boss. I got my orders.’

‘They were my orders. And now I order you to move aside.’

Hendrix shakes his head and folds his arms across his chest. ‘We need her, and the people out there love her. And she’s done trying to run. She’s promised us all that she will stay and see this through. You gotta let her do that now. I’m doing you a favour. Leave her be, and if in the morning you still want to dish out some wrath? I’ll step aside.’

‘I have to say I agree,’ Billy adds from the door. ‘Please, sir. You don’t want to upset the Nomads. The engagement has made them very happy. And Miss Hooper really has been through enough.’

After some long and very cold stares from the livid Coven Leader, he leaves.

‘Thank you,’ I tell both Hendrix and Billy before they leave.

‘Don’t mention it, Little Witch,’ Hendrix tells me.

Billy looks up at Hendrix as they both leave. ‘Is it me? Or does Grayson seem to be getting a little... err...’

‘I think the word you’re looking for is unhinged. And yeah... I think that about sums it up,’ Hendrix says.

‘Should we be worried?’

‘Probably,’ Hendrix laughs. ‘But ain’t shit we can really do about it, is there? Except protect her.’ He looks at me one final time. ‘I got your back.’ He glances at Gabriel. ‘Both of ya.’

The door shuts behind them and I quickly turn all my attention to a very winded Gabriel.

‘You and that bloody mouth,’ he laughs painfully, resting his palm on my cheek and trying to hide how much pain he’s in. ‘Are you alright?’

‘I’m fine. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reacted like that. I should have

known better.' I lean forwards so my forehead rests on his. My fingers glide through his dark, tousled hair as I let out a long and heavy sigh. 'What's going on? What are you planning?'

'I asked you to trust me. The more you know, the more danger it will put you in. Please, trust me.' His smile grows. 'They're coming home. Amara and Collins are coming back to us.'

'Is that wise? It will put them in danger. Grayson will just use them as a weapon against us.'

'He already is. Trust me, we need them here with us. Did you see? Hendrix and Billy are starting to doubt him.'

'I saw.' But that does little to settle my nerves.

'You will never have his baby, Lilly. I absofuckinglutely promise you that. I just had to say it, to make him agree to bringing them home and doing the spell.'

'I know. I know.'

'You look so good in that dress,' he says, his fingers playing with the hem. 'I knew it would look good on you when I brought it.'

'Don't you change the subject.'

'Don't be mad,' he whispers longingly, his lips going to my neck. 'I did what I had to do. You'll understand soon. You do trust me, don't you?' His fingertips move from the hem of my skirt, to my inner thigh. All the while, his lips kiss and caress my neck. I cover in goose bumps and feel him smile at my bodies reaction. 'Do you trust me?'

'Of course I do,' I breathe.

His hand glides upwards. His other hand slides behind my ear and gets lost in my hair. I find his mouth with mine and he pushes me down onto the floor.

I feel myself tossing and turning. I know I'm dreaming. But the screams of the Traitors echo in my ears as they plummet from the sky and land with heavy thuds on the ground around me. Their blood splatters everything nearby. The lifeless eyes of all the people that died in the museum explosion watch me constantly. Everywhere I turn, there they are. Watching. Judging. Asking why they died. Asking if their families are okay. If their deaths meant something. Then, I'm forced to watch Grayson torture Amara. He cuts off her fingers and uses his power on her, making her scream.

It's a nightmare. It's a nightmare.

My own repetition turns into Gabriel's, as his gentle kisses and soft strokes along my cheek return me to the real world. I wake in the dark, in the bed I fell asleep in, encased the most loving pair of arms possible.

'It's just a nightmare, Beautiful,' he whispers in the dark. The blues in his eyes glint at me through the mess of his hair. 'Wake up, future wife.' I pull myself in closer to him.

'I'm awake,' I reply, settling my face into his chest so I can feel the slow and steady thump, thump of his heart. With a deep inhale, I bask in his scent and know that in these arms I am home. 'I'm sorry I woke you.'

'I don't mind. You should try and get some more sleep though.'

'I can't sleep. I think that I'm in for a few hours of laying perfectly still as you snore, wrapped around me like a sexy wildebeest.'

'A sexy wildebeest?' he chuckles. 'I've been called many things in my time, but never a sexy wildebeest. I hope that when we're married, you won't grow tired of my snoring and grunting.'

'I said you snore. Not that you grunted,' I laugh, pulling him even closer. We settle in each other's embrace and my smile starts to falter. I know that his has too. There's a hell of a lot on the line. Thousands of lives, not just our own.

'The wife of a rich man fell sick,' he says, kissing my temple. 'And when she felt that her end drew nigh, she called her only daughter to her bedside.'

'Thank you,' I tell him, as he starts to recite my favourite story. 'You look after me so well. And you know exactly what I need.'

'That's because you're my soul mate, Lilly Hooper. And making you happy makes me happy. Now, you relax and listen as I tell you this creepy, twisted story, future wife. Leave all your worries to me. I'll

take care of them for you.' I settle even further into him with a massive grin on my content little face until I fall asleep.



Hand in hand, Gabriel and I head out of the cabin for some breakfast. When we emerge onto the porch, Billy is sitting on a large rocking chair looking comfortable. I assume he's been there a while.

'Good morning,' Billy greets with a genuine smile as he groans his way onto his feet. I look around me with a gasp. 'The children made these for you. In honour of your engagement.'

My heart swells as I see the sheer amount of daisy chains they've made. They twist around the posts and the bannister a hundred times over. They hang like chandeliers from the ceiling and I can barely see the wood of the walls. But that's not all. There's a table laid out with dozens of dishes.

Billy tells me, 'Some of the women baked these for you. A few homemade pies and a couple of casseroles. They really pulled out all the stops. I've had to fend off several of the men and children from pilfering your supply.' He chuckles a deep belly laugh but I notice the crumbs stuck to his shirt.

'I'll be sure to thank them. And please, tell them that they can help themselves. There is no way on earth I'll be able to eat all this.' Billy looks to my left with a raised brow and amused grin. I peer over and catch Gabriel shoving a slice of cherry pie into his face.

I gasp suddenly and look out at the camp. The Nomads are busy with their day to day lives. Cooking. Cleaning. Talking and laughing. Mothers are trying to round-up their children as teenagers gather in groups, chatting away.

I sense magic.

Billy gives a short, deep laugh. 'They're close, I take it?'

'Huh?' Gabriel's says through his pie. 'Who?'

From the edge of the camp, a four-by-four comes into view. The engine shuts off and there are several hoots of the horn.

The passenger door opens.

A thin little brunette woman hurtles out of the car. Her light baggy jeans and oversized plaid shirt aren't her usual style, and her hair is pulled up in a messy bun. Her wide eyes scan the entire camp before settling on me, and when she sees me, her whole face explodes into an enormous grin.

'HONEY!'

'AMARA!'

We're both sprinting towards each other as fast as we can, laughing with our arms wide, ready to hug the hell out of each other.

We collide and our embrace is almost vice like. She's crying and laughing while trying to speak. It's all coming out as a complete nonsense, but I love it. I love her. I love that she's here and I have her in my arms again. When she lifts her tear-streaked face, she inspects mine, before taking my hands and staring at my fingers.

'I knew he was lying! The prick!' she hisses.

'What?'

'Grayson sent me a finger after I tried to come and find you. He told me it was yours.'

I feel her hands and notice that all of her fingers are intact too. 'He pulled the same stunt with me. Guess he was trying to keep us both in line. Thank fuck he was bluffing.'

She's really quite pale and I can tell she's lost weight. Her eyes have deep bags beneath them and her hair is nowhere near as well maintained as it usually is.

'Are you alright?' I ask, letting my own happy tears fall. 'Are you hurt? Have they been looking after you?'

'I'm fine. Fine, Honey. We both are.' She glances over her shoulder and I see the source of the magic I could sense a moment ago. Collins steps out and his boyish smile flashes at me. Then his eyes drift over my shoulder and it widens even further. It's Gabriel's turn to charge across the camp to his best friend. And Collins is more than eager to meet him. They share a hug, a few murmured words of relief and gratitude that each are okay, then turn to join us. Collins hugs me so tight, I can barely breathe. My feet come off the ground and he swings me gently from side to side.

'I'm so glad to see you again,' he says in a soft sigh of relief. 'I've been imagining all sorts. Especially after we got that finger.'

'Same here! He sent me one saying it was one of Amara's.'

'I know, Gabriel just said. What a dick...huh?'

'Totally.'

Behind me, Amara and Gabriel are embracing. His hug is a lot gentler and he wipes her tears away with the sleeve of his shirt as she sobs into his chest. Released by Collins, we all gather.

'Where have they been keeping you? Did they hurt you at all?' I ask them both. Collins drapes his arm around Amara's shoulders as Gabriel takes my hand in his.

'No,' she sniffs. 'We've been in Scotland in some old manor. No electricity or civilisation. It was all rolling fog and Angus cattle for three months. We were just so worried about you and Gabriel. We hardly slept! Are you okay? Because if I'm honest, you look bloody dreadful, Honey.'

'Thanks,' I chuckle as she soothes down my hair in a vain effort to try and tame it. 'We're alright.'

‘Just about,’ Gabriel adds with a forced effort at a smile. ‘I assume you know what happened at the museums?’

‘Yeah.’ Collins says solemnly. ‘Hendrix called us and explained what went down on the journey here. It’s crazy out there, man. That service announcement hasn’t stopped. You should see the streets-’

Gabriel clears his throat and gives a slight shake of his head. When he catches me watching, he puts on a smile.

‘So... did Hendrix tell you the other news?’ Gabriel takes my hand and shows them the ring sitting on my finger. Amara snatches it from his grip and stares at it, mouth open.

‘You got engaged!’ she squeaks.

‘Yeah,’ I laugh. ‘We did.’

‘Tell-me-everything!’



The last few hours have been so good. And much needed.

Sitting on a log at the edge of camp, Gabriel tells the others what’s been going on. I loved his tale of how he proposed. The other parts were not so fun to share. The expedition to the museums. The dead ex-girlfriend. Theo attacking the house and the constant training I’ve had to endure. They tell us that over the last few months, they were kept under heavy guard and told that if they tried to escape, Gabriel or I would be hurt. Then, when Amara tried to leave, they got a finger which Grayson claimed was mine, and they behaved. Much like we did.

The children of the camp come to show me more of their daisy chains. The women come to offer food. The men welcome Collins to the camp.

‘I have to say, the Nomads aren’t what I was expecting. The whole, marry or breed or be a soldier thing? They don’t seem like that at all.’

‘Well, this camp is “*Gabriel’s camp*”,’ Amara says, stuffing cheese cake into her mouth. ‘My dad and I lived at a different one, closer to The Orchard. They’re much more old school. The older generation especially. People about my age are starting to come away from the traditional rules. Like this camp has.’

‘*Gabriel’s camp*?’ I ask, using my fingers as quotation marks. ‘Dare I ask?’

‘About fifty years ago, Grayson got annoyed with me for being lazy and ordered me to set up a new camp,’ Gabriel explains.

‘It’s so weird that my fiancé is five-hundred years old,’ I laugh, tucking into my own slice of desert. ‘So, you set this one up?’

‘Yep. I chose this location and put in plumbing, cabins, designed the security. And as you may have noticed, I’m a lot laxer about the

rules. I didn't force anyone to do anything they didn't want to. But over the years, the residents move about and the rules sometimes come over with them. Parents who grew up in other sites come here and expect their child to follow the same way of life they did. Can't be helped, but if someone comes to me and says they need help persuading their parents to back off, I intervene.'

'Intervene,' Amara laughs. 'You set up a whole school so kids can get a decent education and make something of themselves.' She looks at me. 'He's provided passports for hundreds of Nomads, so they can travel the world.'

'That's because he's awesome.' I grin, smacking my lips on his cheek.

I spot Connor skirting around watching us. When I call him over, he approaches a little nervously.

I introduce him as the man who has been my saviour as far as the journal is concerned, and a real friend these past few months. Connor watches them and shuffles his feet, unsure how he will be received. But Amara, hearing how good he's been to me, drags him down beside her and insists that he tells her all about himself. Any friend of Lilly's is a friend of hers.

Everyone is happily chatting and laughing as the sun begins to set. The fires are lit and music floats peacefully through the air as everyone takes the weight of the day from their feet and sits to enjoy their evening meals. My face aches I've been laughing so much and I feel refueled, rested and surrounded by the people I love the most.

I sense him before I see him. Grayson and Hendrix emerge through the trees, deep in conversation. I watch as they walk past the Nomads. As Hendrix talks, Grayson nods. They head towards us.

'We leave for Dartmoor in the morning. Before sunrise.' Grayson looks at Collins. 'I suggest you spend the rest of your evening teaching her how to heal herself effectively. If Lilly dies tomorrow, I'm killing Amara. Just so you know.'

Gabriel squeezes my hand to stop me from arguing.

'She won't die,' Amara says firmly. 'And she won't fail.'

Grayson leans down so his face is in hers. 'For your sake, I hope you're right.'

He leaves, cruel laughter tumbling from his lips.

Hendrix pats my shoulder as he passes. 'Ya got this, Little Witch. I know ya do.'

We all sit in silence for a few minutes before Collins gets to work on explaining how to heal.

I've become accustomed to staring at darkened ceilings. Outside is silent. Everyone is fast asleep. I stir and Gabriel shifts, but I manage to prize myself free of his limbs and get out of bed without waking him. On the floor, lying on a mattress, Amara and Collins are fast asleep in each other's arms. Connor is curled up on a chair in the corner, snoring away. Everyone is so peaceful.

Everyone except me.

I sneak across the floor, picking up a blanket on my way, and head out onto the porch with it draped around my shoulders.

Hendrix is sat across the way watching the cabin. He sees me come out but makes no effort to try and talk to me. A simple nod and he carries on sipping from his flask.

I sit on the steps with the blanket pulled tightly around my body, fending off the light chill in the air, and I close my eyes. I push out everything in my mind. I ignore the doubt and fear of what the morning will bring. I reject the questions I want so desperately to ask about Gabriel's plan. And I try to forget the death and destruction surrounding the retrieval of my ancestors wedding ring. And the hatred I hold for the Hunters that killed so many just to try and kill us.

With a deep breath, I relax my muscles, release the tension in my shoulders and just listen to the woods living in the night. The leaves above me rustle in the gentle breeze. Crickets sing from all directions and owls hoot in the darkness. The dying embers of the abandoned fires spit their last and nothing else disturbs me. Not my thoughts, which I have made silent. Not the Nomads, who are all sleeping, blissfully unaware that today we start a spell that will change everything. And not my friends, who lie in the small room behind me, lost to dreams.

The sounds and smells of the forest at night stir a sense of nostalgia in me. The way the rotting of fallen leaves warms my nostrils. The sound of the wind weaving between branches and the crickets singing their endless song.

It makes me think of my mum.

Of the little cabin we shared when I was a small child. I find a memory popping into my mind of me playing by a small stream. I couldn't have been more than four. My feet were freezing in the shallow trickling water as I dropped petals, just to watch them float away. I remember the sound of the woodpecker that lived close by,

chirping and pecking the bark of the trees around me. I lifted my gaze and shielded my eyes from the stream of sunlight that poured in through the branches above me. I always wanted to see the woodpecker but could never find it. Then a voice sails into my memory. A man's voice, and he's calling my name in a cheery melodic way.

'Llllllllyyyyy,' he sings 'Lllllllly? Where are you, Buttons?'

I turn and I have an enormous grin on my face. 'I'm here, Daddy,' I call back.

A man with long brown hair, tied back in a ponytail, joins me barefoot in the water before he scoops me up and rests me on his hip. 'You looking for that woodpecker again?' he asks. I nod, my curly brown hair moves around my face as he chuckles softly, tucking it behind my ear. It was before I got my magic and my hair was not yet red. 'Well, Buttons,' he says happily. 'Let's go and see if we can find him. Ready?' He pops me on his shoulders and looks up at me as I twist my little fingers in his hair. His emerald green eyes are so youthful and full of love. 'You'll see him far better from up there.'

'Don't drop me, Daddy.'

'Never, Buttons. Never.'

I open my eyes and look back up into the trees. We never did find that woodpecker, my dad and me. I remember that day. The things we did. Playing Poohsticks and picking up chestnuts from the ground. We searched and searched for that damned bird but never found him. Up until a few months ago, the man was faceless. But since meeting Jensen Hartley, the only memory I can muster of my long-lost father has his face. I have no idea if I put it there or if it's the truth.

Could Jensen Hartley really be my dad?

Could the man who loved me and called me Buttons, really be the same man that stood by and watched me tortured? Watched me maimed? Who murdered poor Adam and his wife while trying to lure me into the Traitor camp?

I don't know.

And I don't think I want to know either.

Hendrix has somehow got himself sat beside me without making a single noise. He offers me a drink from a flask which I refuse.

'You should wear a bell.'

'I'm a vampire. Being sneaky is part of the package. Ya look a little lost in thought.'

'Private thoughts. Look, I don't want to be rude-'

'Ya don't give a shit if you're rude to me. Ya want me to fuck off? I will if ya want me to.'

I laugh a little and watch as he waits patiently for an answer. 'Do you think Jensen Hartley is my dad?' I ask.

He swigs once more from his flask. 'You're both a pain in the arse. Both self-righteous and got a mean temper.' He looks at me and gives a half attempt at a shrug. 'It's possible. Ya got the same eyes I guess, but don't really matter what I think. What do *you* think?'

'I don't know. I don't remember much about my dad. I was so young when my mum and I were chased off by Theo. But lately, in my memories, I can see his face. I'm not sure if it's my imagination or if it's real. He said some things when we met and I can't help but think that he may be my father.'

'Does it matter?' he grunts.

'Kinda, yeah. If the man's my dad then-'

'Then what? Ya gonna pick up where ya left off? Daddy daughter picnics and shit? Ya gonna ask why he left and cry about your past trauma? Or are ya gonna go all crazy and kill him?' He waits for an answer to his serious questions.

'I don't know,' I admit.

'Like I said before, Little Witch. Past is the past. Ain't no changing it. Man abandoned you and your mam. When he saw ya next, he did fuck all to help ya and watched silently as your future father in-law hacked you up. Blood, although delicious, means shit, kid. Your family are the people ya *choose*. Not the ones you're obligated to. Trust me. Obligation ain't genuine. Family means nothing. Actions. That's what matters in this world and neither your mam or your dad did fuck all to spare you from the life you have had to deal with. So don't go looking for answers cos it won't change nothing.'

'You know, for an arrogant, sexist and disgusting prick, you sure talk some sense sometimes.'

'I'm old. Seen a lot. Lived through even more. I just tell it how I see it. I don't care if ya wanna hear it and I don't care if I hurt your feelings. If ya want babyin', ya go talk to your gang in there. Ya talk to me when ya want the truth. And I'm happy to give it to ya.' He sits back. 'You chicks are always so emotional. Ya need a man reminding ya of how it really is from time to time.'

'Urgh,' I groan. 'There's the Hendrix I know and loathe.'

'Better believe it, sister.'

'Hendrix?'

'Hmm?'

I lean over and give him a peck on the cheek. He looks dumb-struck. 'Thank you. For helping me. For stopping Grayson when he's about to go too far and for generally being nicer. I know you're doing it for your own reasons, but-'

'I did it for you,' he replies, bashfully. 'I like ya, alright? And...' He glances over his shoulder to make sure no one is listening. 'You tell anyone I said this, I'll deny it.'

'You're not about to tell me you fancy me, are you?' I tease.

'No, Little Witch. I don't fancy ya. You're kinda the first friend I've ever had. Ya make me laugh. And ya make me proud. Ya come a long way since I found ya in that hole under your uncle's house. And I am completely amazed how you keep trying to be good, even after everything that's happened to you.'

I'm a little lost for words. 'Thank you, Hendrix. That means a lot. Can I ask you something? A favour?'

'Shoot.'

'If I do Break, and there's no stopping me... Will you...'

'Yeah?' he asks, encouraging me to carry on.

'Will you kill me? I won't turn into whatever Toby is. Can you promise me that?'

'I tell ya you're my first friend ever, and your response is to make me promise to kill ya if ya Break?'

'You're the only one I can trust to keep their word that you'll stop me.' He hesitates. 'Hendrix?'

'Yeah, yeah. Alright. You Break, I'll kill ya. Happy?'

'Ecstatic.'



As I sit cross legged on the floor of the cabin looking out the open door, Amara takes her time brushing through my hair and tying it up in a neat ponytail. Connor is trying to convince me to eat something. Anything. Holding up toast, bagels, a bowl of cereal. I can't stomach any of it. I'm so nervous. It's not butterflies I have in my belly. It's hornets. Collins and Gabriel are walking about, putting stuff in bags and going over the list of supplies we may need. Without breaking his stride, Gabriel scoops up a box of cookies from the side and drops them in my lap. These I can manage. I nibble at the chocolate chips and watch the commotion.

Gabriel asks Grayson a dozen questions. Questions I'm sure he already knows the answers to, judging by the way Grayson is sighing with each response. Their voices all fade out and begin to muffle as I get lost in my own inner turmoil of what I'm about to face.

'Lilly?' I blink the world back into focus to see Grayson kneeling in front of me. 'You must eat,' he encourages, sounding kind for the first time in months. 'It's a big day for you. I need you on top form.'

'It's a big day for all of us.' I bite into the cookie but drop it back in the box. 'I'm so nervous and my mouth is so dry, it's like eating cardboard.'

'All the same, try. There are a lot of people counting on you.'

'Are any Nomads coming with us?'

‘Just Billy. I really don’t trust anyone else right now. Only we know what we are doing today.’ He gestures around the room. At Amara still tidying my hair. Connor with his nose stuck in a book. Collins and Gabriel who are still packing up. And Hendrix who is by the door standing guard.

‘Any news about Toby? About where he went after London?’

‘No.’

‘What about Theo and Jensen?’

‘Now is not the time to worry about them.’

‘Are the rings safe?’

‘They are. Locked away in a secret place. I will fetch them before we leave.’

‘If I fail-’

‘You won’t.’

‘But if I do. Please don’t hurt the others.’

After a cold stare that tells me he has no intention of making me any such promise, he stands and goes back to organising the others. Amara leans down and whispers in my ear that it’s all going to be okay, and not to worry about them.

‘We’re all set, Boss,’ Hendrix says. ‘Cars are ready and the camp will wake in an hour or so. Best be gone before they do.’

‘Agreed.’

When I get to my feet, Amara and Connor do too. Gabriel picks up his black jacket that’s draped over the end of the bed and slides in on me, zipping it up for me. Good job too. I don’t think I could manage the zipper, I’m so nervous. My fingers feel stiff and they’ve started to shake.

‘You ready?’ he asks, pulling out the ends of my hair from the collar.

I nod, scared to let him hear the fear in my voice. I wish I could just know what his plan is, and what it involves. His hands rest on my shoulders and his blue eyes look deep into mine.

‘Trust me. You can do this. I love you,’ he says.

‘I love you more.’

‘Impossible.’ He takes my hand and walks me outside. The others staying close behind. ‘All I want you to focus on is the stone, and facing the challenge Rebecca Hooper will come at you with. Okay? Don’t worry about anything else. Not me, not Amara, not Grayson. Nothing. You hear me?’

‘I hear you.’

‘Amara, you will travel with Billy,’ Grayson orders. ‘Collins and Connor will be with Hendrix. Lily and Gabriel, with me. That way, if anyone misbehaves while we are out there, everyone will be well... *protected.*’

‘You mean if anyone steps out of line, we’ll be separated and easy targets for you to use as a weapon against Lilly,’ Gabriel contradicts.

‘Precisely,’ he agrees, completely unashamed. ‘Problem with that?’

‘No problem at all,’ Gabriel smirks.

Grayson stretches out his arm to the path leading out of the camp, he looks at me. ‘After you.’

With Gabriel still holding my hand tightly, we head out.

We drive with the windows down, the sound of the wind blasting in has removed the need for anyone to try and fill the silence. I'm glad. I'm always glad when Grayson's silent. But my thoughts rage. Thoughts of the challenge ahead at the stone. Of Gabriel's plan. Of life as Gabriel's wife. And also, why on earth I can feel the ring in Grayson's pocket screaming out to me with power. The longer I've sat in this car with it so close, the more it screeches at me with a high-pitched whistle ringing in my ears. When he turns off the engine, it's just as noisy.

'Are you ready?' Grayson asks.

'Yes,' I reply simply, turning in my seat to look at Gabriel. 'You?'

'Absofuckinglutely,' Gabriel replies. We open the car doors and gather by the bonnet of Grayson's car.

'So where to now?' Grayson asks.

'There's a stream over there.' Connor points down the hill to the right, answering on my behalf. 'We need to follow that until we come to the woods. Apparently, there's a dip in the land. They call it the "Peatra".'

'And then what?'

'Then it's up to Lilly.' He shrugs. 'According to the journal, the Arcane will find the stone.'

'Great.' I look by my feet with hundreds of pebbles and stones littering the ground. 'Talk about a needle in a haystack. How big is Dartmoor?'

'Three-hundred and sixty square miles,' Connor replies. 'Give or take.'

I force a grin. 'Fab. Let's go.' I set off down the hill, pulling Gabriel along with me, keen to get moving. Amara, Collins and Connor jog after us.

'How are you feel-'

'Nope,' I interrupt Amara. 'Don't ask me how I'm feeling, or if I'm alright. And don't ask me if I'm ready to do this. You want to walk with me? You talk about something completely unrelated to me, the spell or magic in general.'

‘Okay, what would you like to talk about?’ Connor asks.

‘Anything.’

‘Okay...’ He takes a few seconds. ‘Did you know that the moon moves away from the earth every year?’

‘It does?’ Gabriel asks, genuinely interested in the random fact.

‘It’s a tiny distance,’ Connor says. ‘But eighty-five million years ago, it was orbiting the earth about thirty-five feet from the planet’s surface!’

‘Is that true?’ Amara asks me in complete disbelief.

‘I have no idea,’ I laugh. Connor insists it is. He swears to it. She asks for another fun fact.

‘Did you know, that a ten-year old mattress weighs double what it did when new?’

‘No. Why?’

‘Because it’s filled with dust mites, their feces and corpses, our dead skin cells, sweat, dandruff, hair, dust-’

‘Eurghh, okay stop,’ she squeals. ‘That’s disgusting. That’s sooo disgusting.’

We all chuckle as she shudders.

‘I’m buying a new mattress every year from now on, Collins.’

‘No problem, babe,’ he laughs, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and kissing the crown of her head. ‘I have one,’ he says to the rest of us. ‘Did you know that the electric chair was invented by a dentist?’

‘No way,’ I laugh.

‘I read that actually,’ Gabriel agrees. ‘How about this. Did you know that if you sneeze with your eyes open, they can pop out of your head?’

‘Bull!’ I insist.

As we walk, this carries on. Random facts and disgusting truths spill out, making us laugh, all in a bid to keep ourselves distracted.

To keep me distracted. All the while, the magic in that ring continues to call out.

We reach the stream and follow it for another twenty minutes, until the trees get thicker and the path is almost non-existent.

‘Bloody hell,’ Gabriel mutters, helping me over a root half the height of me. ‘Where the hell are you leading us, Connor?’

Connor’s scrambling over the root behind me. ‘Just where the map – whoa!’ He falls off and lands on his face. Quickly, he jumps to his feet. ‘- Told me to go. Shouldn’t be too far now.’ He carries on walking like nothing had happened, and we all follow.

Gabriel leans down into my ear chuckling. ‘That man is seriously the clumsiest person I have ever met.’

‘Right?’ I laugh, sliding my arm around his waist as we walk.

‘So, you’re telling me that there’s a good chance my lipstick has fish scales in it?!’ Amara complains, panting as we climb a steep hill.

‘Yep.’ Connor nods. ‘A very good chance.’

‘Well, I’m tossing them out as soon as we get-’

‘Gabriel?’ I grab his arm and stop. Everyone halts as I freeze. ‘Gabriel, I sense magic. Someone’s here,’ I say in a panic. I feel it in the air. The sensation of energy pulsing around me. But it’s unfamiliar. Not like Toby or Theo. Or anyone else’s. ‘I think it’s coming from this direc-ARGH!’ I reach out and manage to grab his outstretched hand before falling. But I’m too far over the edge of a pit I had no idea was even there and he ends up coming with me.

We fall.

The ground seems to have just disappeared from beneath us as we skid and roll down a good twenty-foot slope, coming to an abrupt stop on some very hard and jagged stones.

‘Ow,’ I groan, reaching up and holding the back of my head as he lands beside me. ‘That didn’t tickle.’

‘No shit. You alright?’ he asks, pushing himself up and wincing as he does. Nodding, I hold out my hand and he helps me to sit.

‘You two alright?’ Grayson calls down, peering over the edge and backing away as it starts to crumble.

‘I think so,’ Gabriel replies, checking me over and making sure the back of my head isn’t bleeding. He looks around us. ‘Where the fuck did that drop come from?’

Grayson and the others skillfully slide down the ditch. Except Connor, who ends up skidding down on his backside.

Obviously.

‘Maybe you can at least try and be careful?’ Grayson scorns, as he helps Gabriel pull me to my feet.

‘I’m fine,’ I tell him, pulling my arm free from his grip and turning to Gabriel instead. ‘Are *you* alright?’

‘Fine. Perfectly fine.’

‘We’re here!’ Connor calls, looking around and brushing grit from his trousers as Collins helps him to his feet. ‘This is what Rebecca describes in the journal. This deep formation here. The Peatra.’ He gestures to the walls enclosing us.

It’s an enormous trench. It looks man made, and surrounds us in a perfect circle. The edge is thick with trees. They cover it in a canopy, except for the very centre, where the slightest bit of natural light funnels through the top. As I stand here, I feel it. The closer I get to the centre of the circle, the stronger it becomes.

Magic!

But not from a person as I originally thought. It’s similar to the feeling of the ring, but so much stronger.

I start to run and I hear the others yelling at me to stop, but I’m

too excited. I fall to my knees and start digging with my hands. Amara skids to a stop with me and helps without even asking why. They all do. Until we see it.

‘Is that...?’

Well, I needn’t have worried about finding it. Because Rebecca wasn’t talking about a random stone or pebble. Not even close.

I wipe the dirt and leaves away to reveal the top of a square pillar that looks like it’s made of glass, buried deep into the ground. It’s a dark-red and on the very top there’s a seven-pointed star engraved into it.

‘It’s a Bloodstone,’ I breathe. ‘A great big Bloodstone.’ It certainly looks like it, but the colours are still. Unlike the one I stupidly made with Grayson which swirls like a storm of waves and colour. We dig deeper around the edge.

‘It goes down deep,’ I tell Gabriel.

‘Is this the magic you can sense?’ he asks.

‘Yeah.’ I rest my hand on it and feel it hum. ‘It is. I can feel it.’

‘So, how do we get this thing started?’ Collins asks.

‘I’ve got this,’ I tell them all, getting to my feet. ‘In the journal, Rebecca writes that the boundary needs to be clear of all but the Arcane and the ring. So, if you leave me with the rings and get clear of the boundary, that will be fine.’ I point to the ridge that surrounds us. ‘I’m guessing that’s the boundary so I suggest you all get back up there.’ I glance at Gabriel who has started to chew his lower lip. I notice how he keeps glancing above us, at the tree line surrounding us. His gaze falls on me and he nods his approval of my plan.

‘We’re not leaving you down here!’ Amara insists, folding her arms across her chest as she gives me a *don’t be a prat* kind of look. Even her little hip pops to the side.

‘This is for Lilly to do,’ Gabriel tells her. ‘We need to go, and stay out of her way until this is done.’

Amara throws her arms around me and wishes me luck, warning me

that if I get myself killed, she'll kill me. Collins gives me an enormous bear hug and tells me to be safe.

'You remember what I told you about healing yourself?' he asks. 'About feeling the injury and channeling your power? As soon as you feel it, Lilly. Remember?'

'I remember. Thank you.'

I let him go. Connor holds out his hand for me to shake. But I throw my arms around him and hug him tight. He happily returns my embrace.

'You can do this,' he whispers in my ear. I give a nod and let him go.

'Good luck, Miss Hooper,' Grayson says, attempting a comforting smile. He pulls out a small brown envelope and puts it in my palm. 'The rings are in there. Let's just hope one of them is the genuine article.' Then, he reaches out as if to hug me.

'Yeah, thanks,' I mumble, turning my attention to Gabriel instead.

The kiss he lands me with is borderline indecent. But the others have already started climbing back up the edge of the chasm. And to be honest, I don't care about decency. About being proper. I'm scared. I'm afraid that I'll fail and put everyone in danger.

No. That's not an option. I can do this. I've survived hell. This will be a piece of cake.

You can do this!

As his kiss slows, he rests his nose against mine and lets out a long breath. His eyes tell me he's worried. Terrified even. Like if he lets go of me, he may never touch me again. 'You got this,' he tells me. 'I know you got this.'

'Damn right I have. Do I need to know about the plan-'

'Shh. And no. All you need to do now is focus on this test. That's all. Nothing is happening today but you must, must complete this test, Lilly. Understand?'

‘If I do fail,’ I whisper, ‘Don’t let Amara get hurt, okay? Don’t let Grayson touch her. If it looks like I’m not going to make it-’

‘Don’t you dare speak like that-’

‘I mean it. If it looks like I’m not going to survive, you take Amara, Collins and Connor, and you run. Promise me.’

‘I’m not going-’

‘Promise me!’

We glare at each other, but he nods and promises that he will. ‘I love you, future wife.’

‘I love you more, future husband.’

‘Impossible,’ he says with a half-smile as he backs away from me. ‘That, my love, is simply *im-poss-ib-le*.’

I watch them all make their way back up the edge to the boundary and they turn to watch.

This is it.

The first stone.

Holy fucking christ...

I wipe my sweaty hands on my jeans as I look down at the Bloodstone buried deep into the earth. To say I'm nervous would be the world's biggest understatement. But this is my path. This is what I was born to do.

You can do this. You can!

'Thanks, weird little voice in my head,' I mutter, before tearing open the envelope and tipping the rings out into my hand. As soon as I do, as soon as the ring from the British Museum makes contact with my skin, I feel magic. It overwhelms every cell my body has. It's ferocious and strong. And foreign. It's not mine! The sudden influx of strange power has me gasping and dropping the rings to the floor.

'Are you alright?' Grayson calls down. 'Lilly?!' he urges when I don't respond.

'Err, yeah,' I call back. 'Yeah I'm fine. I just dropped the rings.'

I kneel into the dirt and examine them both. One a fake, and the other, which is still producing a high-pitched ringing that's almost like nails scratching on a chalk board. The closer my hand gets, the louder it becomes until I'm almost deafened by the noise. When the tip of my fingers touches it, it silences and once more the magic fills me. I quickly pull back again.

I wonder.

I touch the ring once more and look at a small pebble in the dirt. I use the intruder magic and beckon it towards me and sure enough, it dances across the rough ground to my knee.

'Oh shit...' I whisper as I realise. I have magic! Without the Bloodstone. Without Grayson. The ring is giving me access to magic! It's not my own, I can feel that it's not. But I couldn't care less. I let go and it leaves me. It only works when I'm holding it. This is my chance! If I have this ring, I can defend myself. Protect the people I love. Grayson will no longer be my captor and I can free us all from

his threats and control.

I look back up to the ridge and try to hide my smirk. As I do, Grayson gives me access to my own magic. Magic he can take away any second. The most welcoming wash of power swarms through every single one of my molecules. From the top of my head to the tip of my toes. My magic rushes back and fills me completely. It feels much stronger than before. More filled with determination and purpose. It completely takes my breath away.

I pick up the ring.

I'll put it on, I'll use my magic to disarm Grayson and send the others away so they can't be hurt. I'll attack. I'll get my Bloodstone.

I can get us all out of here with magic Grayson can't take away from me!

I slide on the ring, but before I can do any of that, I'm yanked through the air by an unseen force, like the ring and the stone are magnetized, and my hand collides onto the Bloodstone.

As soon as my hand and the ring touch it, the colours in both the stone and the ring spring to life and begin to glow. The deep reds mix with its luminescent counterparts and begin moving faster and faster until it's a furious storm of colour and motion. The Bloodstone becomes hotter and hotter. Brighter and brighter.

'LILLY!' Grayson yells, as the ground begins to shake and the hot light seeps out from the stone. We all shield our eyes as it continues to glow, the colours moving so fast it's nothing more than a blur. 'IT'S GOING TO EXPLODE! GET AWAY FROM IT!'

I try, but my hand is stuck as if it's glued in place. In a great big flash of red and black energy, the stone explodes and sends me several feet away. I throw up my arms to protect myself from the light and heat that hurtles out of it. The wave of red and black light crashes against the border of the ridge above me and creates an enormous barrier, sealing me off from the others. It looks like a force field. Amara reaches out to touch it.

'NO! DON'T!' Gabriel shouts, snatching her hand away. 'NO ONE TOUCH IT! It's a Mortem Wall. You touch it, you die!' He looks down at me sealed within it, looking lost and terrified beyond words. 'No

one can pass through it without dying. She's stuck in there.'

Their attention shifts from me and the death wall, to something over my shoulder. Their mouths are open and the look of shock on Grayson, Gabriel, Collins and even Hendrix is more than disconcerting. Slowly, I turn to see what has them so stunned.

'Holy-hell!'

Standing on the top of the stone, hovering five feet or so in the air, is what I imagine a ghost to look like. It's a woman. Late thirties, early forties perhaps. Her long royal blue dress slowly blows in the nonexistent wind. Her opaque body looks like it's floating in water. But her waist-length red hair and the curve of her lips tell me this is no random spectre.

'Rebecca Hooper,' I gasp. Her eyes open. They're completely white. Her skin is almost grey. She looks formidable. She doesn't look at me. She doesn't seem to look at anyone or anything in particular at all.

'In this location, I started a spell to create the Veil, separating the Arcane Realm from the Mortal Realm. If you wish to return to magic, you must pass my test. Succeed, and the first of three locks will be destroyed. When all three locks have been removed, witches will be reunited with their magic.' Her voice echoes all around us. Bouncing off the sides of the ditch.

'W-what test?' I ask apprehensively, watching the ghost.

'You must overcome what you fear most. For fear has no place in the heart of the Arcane. Prove you are strong enough, worthy enough, and not only will you break this lock... You shall be rewarded.'

'Rewarded?'

'If you fail, you will die.'

She reaches out her hands and from each, a streak of pure blue flames pours out and lands on the ground in front of me. The fire swirls and forms a shape.

Two shapes.

Before me, made completely out of blue flames, are two massive

panthers. Their mouths open as they snarl and growl at me. Their big paws dig into the ground and their tails swipe slowly from side to side.

‘Face your fears, and defeat my beasts with beasts of your own.’

She lowers her arms and stares into the night.

‘Errr... How do I make fire beasts?’ I call out, watching the increasingly antagonised cats. Dirt kicks up as they claw at the ground. Those claws are very, very real. One of them gives an enormous roar, making me jump and scurry backwards. ‘HOW DO I MAKE FIRE BEASTS?!’ I yell.

‘HOW THE HELL ARE WE SUPPOSED TO KNOW?’ Grayson bellows back.

‘GET ON YOUR FEET!’ Gabriel orders. ‘MAKE SOMETHING!’

‘WHAT?’ I yell back. ‘I’VE NOT DONE ANYTHING LIKE THIS BEFORE.’ The cats are getting low, their eyes squarely on me and their shoulder blades begin going up and down. ‘THEY’RE GOING TO POUNCE! WHAT THE HELL DO I DO?’

‘SOMETHING!’ Gabriel yells. ‘BLOODY ANYTHING! GET THE FUCK UP FOR A START!’

I jump to my feet. And they spring to theirs. They sprint towards me as I stand frozen.

‘LILLY! GET YOUR HEAD OUT YOUR ARSE!’ Gabriel bellows.

I send a streak of flames at them. The bright red explodes from me with such force I stagger back. They dodge it. I throw another streak so powerful, it makes a crater in the ground and sends boulders of dirt and rock into the air. A few pound into the Mortem Wall and explode into even more pieces. Behind the barrier, everyone jumps back. But nothing gets through and they swiftly resume their positions, keen to watch, like spectators at a gladiator fight. The panthers dart off-course and miss my attack by a hair. It doesn’t slow them down. The first one leaps. I see those blazing teeth and freeze.

‘LILLY, MOVE!’

Gabriel's voice snaps me back. I throw myself out the way, but it's red-hot claw catches my arm. It cuts my flesh and cauterises it all at once.

Hell, does it hurt.

The panther readies itself to take another shot at me as I clutch my wounded arm to my chest. Another wave of my fire pulses from me, sending them both through the air. The one with my blood still on its claws, bulldozes into the barrier. It doesn't die. Instead, the flames split and a third beast comes to life.

No. Not a beast. A man.

My uncle Harry.

I watch as the flames twist and contort his body. He looks down at me. A man made of fire.

'You, *girl...*' his voice calls through the air and sounds exactly as I remember it, but ten times louder. He steps forwards and starts making his way down towards me. As he does, he increases in size and the flames that form his skin burn brighter. '... Are a monster!' His voice booms and echoes all around me. '... And you, *girl...*' He takes another step towards me and again, increases in size. He stands twice as tall as he ever was and I crane my neck up to watch him as he carries on growing. '... Got what monsters deserve.'

He takes another step towards me and I stumble back. He continues to grow with every step, and soon, he's as big as the trees that tower over head. The others behind the Mortem Wall stare in quiet disbelief at the flaming titan who's taken the form of my dead uncle. The same fear I felt as a child, swells inside my chest. I feel twelve years old again. I feel like I should lower my gaze as to not upset him. That I should breathe quieter to avoid annoying him. These emotions appeared at the precise time he did, and I wonder if Rebecca Hooper has planted them there. If this is part of the test.

The panthers are circling his feet, snarling and snapping their jaws. Harry laughs a low, amused chuckle, that he would always produce when torturing me. It rumbles the ground and trails of dirt and stone crumble from the ridge's edge. He raises a giant fist. The air roars as he does and it roars even louder as he brings it down.

Move!

I barrel-roll out of the way and land on my back. Quickly, I lift myself and shuffle backwards, trying hard to return to my feet, but I'm too startled at what I'm facing. He gives another deep laugh.

'Everything that happened to you,' he says, once more raising his fist. 'You deserved.' He brings down his gigantic arm. I scramble away on my hands and knees and get showered by a wave of dirt as he hammers his fist into the ground. I look over my shoulder. His arm is stretched out ready to swipe at me, his palm open, like he's about to swat a fly. 'EVERYTHING!' he roars. 'YOU DESERVED ALL OF IT!' I'm on my feet and sprinting away. He's slow, due to his size, but if I get hit I know I'm dead. He stomps after me, each footstep he takes shakes the ground. He has maybe three steps to take before he reaches me and I have to sprint hard to get any distance between us. I come to the wall and look up. It's too steep to climb and even if I did, I can't get past the Mortem Wall. The footsteps have stopped and slowly, breathlessly, I turn. He towers over me. I'm no bigger than his ankle. He peers past his belly. The panthers prowl closer, their heads low and teeth bared as they snap and growl. Instead of saliva falling from their lips, it looks like lava. When it hits the ground, it sizzles. In the distance, the others are yelling, but I have no idea what. Fear and adrenaline course through me a mile a minute and the blood rushes through my ears so fast it's almost deafening. Harry leans down, his hand rests on the verge to keep his enormous frame from falling forward. Debris tumbles overhead and I raise my arms to stop myself from getting hit. He gets so close, the heat from his face makes my eyes water. It's remarkable how the detail of his features comes through the flame. The wrinkles he had on his brow. The cruel curl of his lips, and how his eyes narrowed just so. I'm frozen on the spot. My panting hurts my chest as it rises and falls rapidly. He scoffs and smirks at me.

'I hate you,' he taunts. 'Your mother regretted you.' He leans in a little closer and I fall on my backside with a small yelp. 'Your father disowned you.' The panthers circle his ankles, watching me. 'And when you die...' He reaches out his hand, palm flat, and I know he means to crush me. I sink down into the dirt and look up at him feeling terror and dread at my impending death, mixing with the fear he inflicted on me as a child. 'No one,' he mocks. 'No one will mourn you.'

You will not die here. No one will need to mourn you. You are loved,

Lilly. You are wanted. And you are needed by so many.

The words are like a loving whisper in the very back of my head. The voice which has been talking to me for the past few months is once more here and sounding as firm and sure as it ever has.

You are not the girl you were when he was alive. You killed him once. Kill him again!

I throw up my hand and send out a stream of my fire. A deep red inferno explodes from my hand straight to his open palm, and he withdraws as if he really has been burnt. He stumbles back a little as I swiftly get to my feet. He growls angrily. I send out another shot as I stand. A steady stream of pure red and heat go straight to his chest. He roars as he watches it crash into him.

‘I don’t fear you. Not anymore!’ I tell him, taking a step forward and forcing him back. ‘You are dead.’ I raise my second hand and my stream doubles in not only size, but ferocity. He staggers back further. ‘And when I killed you, Harry, no one mourned you. No one!’ I send out a wave of fire and he flies backward, crashing into the ridge. The earth trembles, making everyone around us stumble. I walk towards him as he tries, clumsily, to return to his feet. ‘And now, Uncle Harry, I get to kill you all over again.’ My fire spreads up my arms and I send it all out to him. It covers him completely. The red fire attacks the blue and he squirms and bellows while trying in vain to put it out. I take a breath and rest my hands close to my chest. I feel the power converge and with a fierce scream, I let it out. Fire and sparks are expelled from my body like a controlled explosion and it batters him relentlessly, destroying his form piece by piece until there is nothing left of him.

The panthers turn their heads from the empty space where Harry just was, back to me. I can see real anger on their faces. I shoot more flames towards them. They writhe beneath the streams as I lift them into the air, holding them captive, high above my head. More and more power I pour out, but they just wriggle.

Why won’t they die?

The ground tremors violently beneath my feet and I fall, losing the hold I had on the panthers. The edge of the cliff, the exact spot where Harry’s fire-titan form faded, is moving. Chunks of earth and rock start protruding outwards. Crumbling and rolling, gathering into a

pile. Then, suddenly, another form bursts out of the side of the cliff. A life size form made of rock, dirt and stone lands with a heavy thud in front of me.

Grayson.

‘Let me put your position in a way you will understand.’ His voice is dry and cracked, but it’s still Grayson’s voice. He charges forwards with his stone fists clenched at his side. I watch it wide-eyed and he’s on me before I can react. His solid fingers wrap around my throat and I’m lifted off the ground. ‘You will have no magic unless I deem fit to give it to you. You can’t run because I will find you.’ Behind him, I see the others yelling. Grayson’s simply watching the form of himself throttling me. I’m shaken as I take hold of the stone hand gripping my throat. ‘If you hinder this spell, if you try and run or fight me in any way, if you so much as vex me, Lilly Hooper, I will make sure Amara knows nothing but misery, pain and suffering till the day she dies.’ I’m tossed away with such force, I roll across the hard ground like a tumble weed. The panthers charge. I send another stream of fire at them as I scramble to my feet and they hurtle away from me to the other side of the ridge. The stone version of Grayson is stomping over just as angry and determined as the very real version would.

‘You will behave and do exactly as I ask of you because if you don’t, I will lock up Gabriel and have bits of him handed to you every time you disobey me. As well as Collins.’ He raises his foot and kicks me. Blood splatters my face and my vision blurs. I attack him with fire as I blink blood out of my eyes but he just strolls through it. Using my Telekinesis, I hurl a boulder at him from behind me. It crashes into his shoulder and chips away at his form, but he doesn’t stop. I scramble backwards and he simply follows.

‘You will be the reason your friends suffer and die!’ He reaches down and takes hold of my hair. ‘You look me in the eyes and tell me if you think I’m bluffing. AM I BLUFFING?!’ he bellows in my face, making me yell. But not through fear, because I remember these words. They’re the exact same words he said to me the night he branded me. The yell I produce is so furious, so angry and venomous, it blocks out everything else. The pain in my face and the doubt of not being able to win this fight fades, because right now, I know I won’t stop and I will not fucking lose this fight! Not to him!

As I yell, rocks, stones and boulders fly through the air from behind me and they all hit my target.

Him.

He's pelted like rapid-fire from a dozen guns and his form chips and shatters as his stone hands tighten their grip.

'And when you have my children-'

'I WILL NEVER HAVE YOUR CHILDREN!' I scream like a savage. 'AND YOU WON'T TOUCH MY FAMILY!' My hands raise and the dirt beneath his feet swarms around him, battering him hard and eroding him by force. My voice fades beneath his grip. But still, the earth does as I command and starts to swallow him. He sinks down, still fading as a storm of earth and stone cascade down on him. I'm on my knees as his crumbles but his hand is still holding on. His face is half gone. His waist is buried deep in the ground. He pulls me down, further and further until only his shoulder, neck and arm remain. He whispers his final words before he disintegrates. 'You should have just fallen in love with me like you were supposed to.'

'I will never love you. No one ever will, because you are unlovable.'

As soon as I'm free, I crawl backwards, clasping my neck which I know is bruised and swollen. I can barely swallow and when I try to talk, my voice is a hoarse whisper. I struggle to catch my breath. I channel my magic and heal myself. My nose stops bleeding. The bruises on my neck start to fade. The pain stops.

As I push myself up to my feet, I wipe the blood off with my sleeve and look up at the ridge. Collins and Billy are holding Gabriel who has clearly attempted to reach me. But if he touches the Mortem Wall he'll die. I take a few steps closer and nod, telling them I'm ok.

But their eyes widen as they see something over my shoulder.

The sound of rushing water fills the air. I turn.

From the rubble and ash where Grayson's rock form faded, water is spilling up through the earth.

'I'm facing all the elements,' I whisper, realising the truth of my situation. 'Fire. Earth... Water.' I swallow and get ready to face whatever's coming next. 'Bring it on.'

As the form starts to build in a swirling tornado, a sharp snarl reaches my ears. Behind me, the panthers are preparing to resume their attack. Without looking away from the water that is still choosing its form. I send out my magic into the ground. Jagged rocks shoot up and protrude from the earth all around the cats and seal them in a cage of stone. I hear their sharp claws scratch at the inside of their prisons. They're contained. For now.

The water continues to build. Twisting and churning, creating its form until... until I see who it is.

Who else could it be?

I see the theme.

Fire to match Harry's fierce temper.

Stone to match Grayson resolve and hard headedness.

And water.

An element that can soothe, give life, or destroy everything.

'Hello, Red.'

'Toby.'

'You can't have a baby, Lilly. I can't let you.' His form is smooth. His voice tranquil. He doesn't come to me. He never did. It was always me that ran to him. 'We can't have this baby. I'm sorry. I am so sorry,' he continues. 'But you can never have a ba-'

I send a boulder soaring straight through his face. 'Shut up.'

His face reforms, and as it does, his voice returns. 'I saw you die!' he insists. 'I had a vision soon after we met of you pregnant and dying. I couldn't let you die.' I walk closer, my whole-body rigid with a passionate rage. He looks into my eyes. 'I love you too much. I did it to save you.'

'I'm going to kill you.'

He laughs and shakes his head. 'Not if I kill you first.'

In a second I'm surrounded. Trapped in a pillar of water that forces itself down my throat and nose. He's drowning me.

No!

I attempt to create my fire but his water extinguishes it before it can catch. The pressure in my lungs is intense as they scream out for oxygen.

Water. Water. What will defeat water?

More water won't help. If anything, I'll just drown more. If that's possible.

Then it comes to me. An idea. I have no clue if it will work, but I'm a second away from blacking out. As soon as the idea forms, my magic obeys.

I turn cold. Freezing cold from the inside out and the chill spreads outwards, claiming the water and turning it into ice. It creaks and groans as it transforms. And I'm stuck fast. With a burst of my telekinetic power, I shatter it into a thousand pieces and shards of ice explode outwards, taking Toby with it.

I fall to the ground, gasping and coughing up water.

'LILLY! LILLY!' I look over at the others who look frantic. None more than Gabriel. 'Are you okay?'

All I can do is raise a hand and nod while I try to reclaim my breath.

'Come on, Beautiful,' Gabriel encourages. 'You can do this! I know you can do this!'

The wind starts to pick up. A strong breeze blows my hair and makes the loose dirt dance across the floor. Leaves and twigs join the skit as it starts to pick up in strength. I raise my hand as it gets more aggressive. Dirt and dust starts flying all around me, but I'm ready. I'm more than ready. I get to my feet. The panthers are still trapped in the rock fortress and the Mortem Wall still glimmers. Rebecca Hooper continues to hover and everyone else just watches.

Wind, I assume.

What the hell defeats wind?

‘Nothing.’

The voice makes me colder than the ice did.

‘Shh, Lills. Shh!’ he whispers. His voice carries around me on the wind. It touches me everywhere the breeze does. It smothers me. Consumes me.

Just as he did.

I force myself to turn. My body is stiff and uncooperative. No part of me wants to face him. None. But I know I must.

When I see him standing there, my breath catches and I can’t talk. I can’t move. I can’t do anything. Exactly like I used to react when he was alive. Tears fall fast down my cheeks. The anger and need for vengeance disappears as a terror I haven’t felt for years crashes back inside of me. I know that Rebecca has put it there. That same fear. But it’s far too real to pretend that I’m not feeling it. My feet take me backwards as I just stare wide-eyed at the blue, semi-transparent form standing before me. That boyish smile and those lifeless eyes violate me.

‘You must overcome your fear if you want to break this lock. But you will never stop fearing me.’

‘S-stay away...’

‘Shh, Lills’ he whispers, walking slowly towards me. ‘Why do you always struggle?’ he asks with a light laugh, shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head. ‘Why do you always cry? You know you like it.’

I try to talk. But nothing comes out. Each step I take back, he takes one closer. The wind picks up. It swirls around us, gaining in speed and strength.

‘Hush now. You’ll wake Harry. And you know that would just make him angry.’ He continues to calmly follow me as I retreat slowly, stunned and horrified. My back hits the stone cage holding the panthers in place. ‘If you upset me, I’ll call for the Hunters to come and take you away. Is that what you want?’

He keeps coming. Sauntering closer.

‘G-GABRIEL?!’ I force his name from my mouth. The form of Ryan reaches out to touch me. When I hear Gabriel call my name, I turn and sprint towards him. The wind batters me and knocks me from left to right. I fall to the ground and roll as the wind builds and builds in strength. I dig my fingernails into the dirt and look over my shoulder. Ryan’s coming. I run. I run to the ridge and start climbing. The wind tries to force me down. Debris pelts at my body. Gabriel keeps calling my name. They all do. I focus on my friends and keep climbing. When I reach the ridge, I run towards them.

‘STOP!’ Gabriel yells desperately. ‘If you touch the wall it will kill you! Stop!’ We face each other and I can’t help but sob in a panic. ‘Who is it?’ Gabriel demands, looking scared while glancing over my shoulder. ‘Who is it, Beautiful?’

‘Let me out!’ I cry. ‘PLEASE! LET ME OUT!’

Beyond the howling winds, on their side of the barrier, it’s as still as a summer’s day.

‘I can’t do it! I can’t! Not him. Let me out. LET ME OUT!’

‘You have to! Just turn and fight!’ Grayson demands.

‘Liiilllllyyyyyy.’ His playful voice sings at me. Gabriel looks over my shoulder and so do I. He’s hovering in the air. Still smiling. Still calm. ‘Shhhhh,’ he soothes. ‘Just lie still. I promise. You’ll like it.’

‘Oh shit,’ Gabriel says quietly. ‘Ryan. It’s Ryan, isn’t it?’

I cover my ears before falling on the floor, huddling up in the fetal position.

‘It’s not really him!’ Gabriel yells. ‘It’s not him, Lilly. Ryan isn’t really here!’

‘No. No. No. No!’ I cry over and over, shaking my head and clamping down my hands so I can’t hear Ryan’s words. ‘This can’t be happening. Not him. Not him!’

It all goes quiet. I open my eyes hoping to find him gone. Maybe

replaced by another monster. But as soon as I lift my head, I find his face right in mine.

‘It will only hurt for a minute,’ he whispers with a grin.

The air disappears. I’m suddenly in a vacuum and I can’t breathe! I claw at my throat. I pound the floor.

Nothing.

He’s taken the air!

His form lowers down and his feet touch the ground. The wind knocks me down and I’m pinned to the floor by the force of it, and I still can’t breathe. The wind whips across my flesh but not a bit reaches my lungs. Ryan stands beside me, his hand going to his belt. Gabriel is going insane. Not scared. No.

He’s full of rage.

He wants to tear the form of my rapist to pieces.

Lilly?

I hear the voice that’s been whispering to me these past few months in my mind.

Lilly, listen to me now. He’s not real. He’s not here. He’s dead, remember?

‘But he is here. He’ll always be here.’

No. He won’t. You’re here, and all he is, is a distraction. They’re all distractions.

‘Distractions?’

Fire beasts. Defeat her beasts with beasts of your own. Forget him. Fight the panthers!

I have no idea how to make fire beasts, I tell the voice in my own head. I continue watching Ryan who has lowered himself to his knees. He bites his lower lip just as he always did before he would...

Yes... she whispers calmly in my mind. *You do know how to make fire beasts.*

Then, as if the voice somehow pulls it from my memory... *he* pops into my head. Explodes, more like.

A memory of Toby plays out behind my eyes like an old black and white movie.

Toby's hands are on my hips. His mouth, working my neck. His words sending a shiver over my entire body as he whispers to me.

'Everything that matters comes from two places.' He raises one hand and his fingers knot in my hair as we sit beneath our willow tree in the dark. Everyone in my uncle's house is sleeping. *'Your head.'* His other hand lays flat over my chest. *'And here. From your heart. Know what you want.'* His finger would tap my temple. *'And want it. Truly want it. Demand it. Tell your magic what you expect from it. It's yours, Red. You own it. It owes you everything. If you really want it to do something for you, you must see it in your head. And feel it in your heart. Just like I do with you. I own you. You owe me everything. You'd be dead if it wasn't for me. And you've never let me down because you know your place. You know you belong to me and you do everything I ask of you. Master your power, Red, and your power will learn its place too. Now, create a ball of fire in your hand, and send it to that tree over there. It's time you learnt how to control your magic.'*

And I did. For the first time, I had control over my power.

I open my eyes and see her. I see me! Standing by my head, watching Ryan and me. Her white hair blows in the wind and her lilac eyes land on me. A dark smile grows on her lips. She's wearing those bloody shorts and a dirty tank top. Her legs are caked in dried blood. Her wrists are bruised from the chains she was bound in. Tears stain her dirty face and her lip is split. She's me, that night in the barn.

'Help... me!' I mouth, still struggling for air.

She speaks to me. *'It's time you helped yourself. You know everything you need to know to defeat this task. Toby taught you to control your flames. How to create balls of fire. How to hold them in your hand. To make them obey. Do it now. Make them obey. Create a fire beast. You are the Arcane Witch! The Arcane Realm is yours to command!'*

My heart is hammering. Adrenaline is making me shake. Fear has me motionless as Ryan places his legs either side of my hips. His hands take my wrists and pin them above my head. His hands feel solid. Real.

My Broken-self kneels beside me and tucks her hair behind her ear. *'Listen to me. Harry starved you. Beat you. Tortured you. And you killed him. He is here no longer. And neither is the girl who feared him. She hasn't been with you for many years. Grayson has taken your magic. He raped your ancestor. He plans to rape you. Force you to carry his child and torture your friends if you refuse. But you are stronger than him. He knows it. He fears you and he fears your power. That is why he branded you. That is why he threatens you. He is terrified of you. Theo and Jensen are in hiding. They are hiding from you. Not Grayson. Not Hunters. You. Tobias Kendryk runs like a coward. He sneaks about in the shadows. Has others do his deeds because he knows! He knows that if he gets too close to you, if he lets his feelings of whatever passes for love in his heart, win-out, he may return from his Break, and be forced to live with all he has done. You saw it. In the barn. His eyes changed colour, and he fears that most of all. Only you can do that to him. Only you can destroy him and he knows it! He fears it! He fears you!'*

Ryan kicks apart my legs. The others are yelling for me to fight. They don't see her, and I have black spots in my vision from lack of air.

'Ryan is dead, Lilly. You watched him die. Toby destroyed his body. Now you must destroy his memory. You must kill him and free yourself. No man will ever touch you the way he did, ever again. You will never let them. You will kill them before they even get close. And no man will ever make you feel so hopeless, that you wish to end your life. Because now, you have something worth living for. You have you! A life worth living, and people worth loving. Now focus, and let it all go. Let all the fear these men have forced upon you... go. Do not die here!'

I close my eyes. I shut it all out. The snarling from the panthers below. The shouting from my family on the other side of the Mortem Wall. The fear. The self-doubt. The what if's. The sound of Ryan's heavy breathing in my ear.

And I count.

Ten seconds. To close off everything else. To rid myself of fear.

‘One. Two.’

The fear my uncle inflicted on me.

Gone.

‘Three. Four.’

The fear of a life with nothing but chains.

Gone.

‘Five. Six.’

The fear of my own power.

Gone.

‘Seven. Eight.’

Toby and his love.

Gone.

‘Nine.’

The memory of a touch that violated me. That makes me cower from the hands of any man.

Gone.

It was so noisy in my head. So much doubt, self-hatred, disgust and fear. It clouded everything. It was far too complicated.

So I replace it with something the world has given me plenty of.

Anger. Angry is good. Angry is strong.

With each number, it gets quieter. The voices yelling all the things I can’t do, shouldn’t do... They fade until all that’s left is one voice. It used to be Toby’s. Telling me what to do. What to feel. What to say. But now... it’s mine.

‘*Do it for you, Lilly Hooper!*’ My Broken-self says. ‘*Fight for you! Fight*

for your freedom. Fight for your power. Fight for everything they took from you.' She leans down, her mouth close to my ear and she whispers, *'Ten!'*

I reach out and grab Ryan by the throat, squeezing with all the strength my Physical magic gifts me. I push him away, keeping my grip firm, and get to my feet. The more pressure I apply, the more I can breathe. The wind that howls around us diverts all its strength to Ryan and pelts his form. I let go and he's sent flying through the air. Oxygen returns and I can breathe once more. The earth below cracks and rumbles. More water rises from beneath its surface. Beside me, my Broken-self remains by my side, holding onto everything that was holding me back.

I have control now. Complete control.

'That's it, Beautiful,' Gabriel encourages. 'You can do this. You can win.'

I turn to face him. 'I know,' I reply.

The wind moves upwards and raises me in the air. I make it carry me down to the base of the pit. My feet land gently on the floor as the form of Ryan continues being forced back, speaking all the things he used to say. I walk closer.

I know what I need to do.

Defeat the fire beasts with beasts of my own.

Let's do this.

I shatter the stone keeping the panther's prisoner. As soon as they're free, they roar and charge all at once. They jump. Their bodies are flaming. Their claws are out. Their teeth are bared. Their mouths are open wide and they're going for my throat.

Not today.

I hold out my hands and send out another stream of fire. But this one is not for a wall or a barrier. And it's not to attack them. The flames crash in front of me and build. I don't stop until standing between me and the two panthers, are two more creatures.

My creatures.

Wolves.

They stand as tall as me, three times bigger than any real wolf. Their long flame-made hair covers their strong, muscled bodies and moves like molten lava. It drips onto the floor, melting the ground beneath it. Their claws, their teeth and their eyes glow brighter than any real flame ever could. They raise their big padded feet to show the scorched earth beneath.

They – are – beautiful.

Their mouths open wide, their lips pull back showing their huge fangs. Each one of their movements... is me. I am the wolves. I wanted them. I needed them. And now, I have them. I own them.

The blue panthers and the red wolves.

'Kill,' I order.

They charge.

The beasts don't hold back. Their claws, their teeth, their sheer strength is as real as I am. I hear the whimpers of all the creatures as they tear into each other. The furious roars that come with each attack. One of them gets past my fire wolves and comes for me. My fire erupts all over my arms like a snake.

That's an idea, she remarks, still standing up on the ridge, her white hair blowing gently across her face.

The flames leave me slowly. As a snake. Slithering across the ground, growing in size until its body is as thick as Hendrix's giant form. The panther leaps. The snake too. It twines itself around the panther, crushing it as it writhes and growls. I walk towards the panther, pinned and helpless. I hold out my hand and ball it into a

fist. The snake crushes the panther completely and both turn to shapeless fire. The blue flames mix with my red and return to me, covering my left arm in vibrant purple light and heat. My wolves have the final panther pinned. With a nod from me, they tear off its head and toss it high into the air. They all turn back to formless flames and return to me. They become a part of me. Both my arms are alight but there's no pain whatsoever. Just warmth and strength. The image of Ryan fades and everything falls still.

I turn and face the ghostly image of Rebecca who still hovers in the air as if suspended in water. As I make my way to her, she lowers, and plants her feet on the broken Bloodstone still protruding from the ground.

'You have succeeded in your first challenge.' Her voice is low. Only I can hear her. 'You faced your fears and overcame them. Congratulations.' She reaches out her hand for me to take.

I look up at Gabriel. He observes me nervously, itching to come to me but forced to stay put. I reach out, and touch her hand.

My head fills with whispers. It's like a million words are being said all at once in the quietest of hushes. They're Rebecca's words in Rebecca's voice. All her thoughts and spells and insights about magic. It's her knowledge. All of it, pouring into me. But each voice wants to be heard. Each one, desperate to pass on their wisdom and warnings. Her whisperings turn to yelling. And then to screaming. A million words and sentences getting louder, and louder, competing, until my head feels ready to explode. My brain stretches to make room as the information forces itself inside me like a balloon filling with water. But there's too much water. There's too much knowledge. It's too loud. I feel like I'm about to burn from the inside out. She's screaming. No... I'm screaming.

Magic erupts from within her like a violent outward swell. Flames and lightning and energy. It goes straight through me and towards the barrier. To the others. I can't get the coordination together to yell at them to run. But it hits the invisible barrier and rises up like a wave striking a cliff. We all watch it go right up into the trees, higher and higher, turning every branch it touches to ash. But the power can't get beyond the wall. So, it continues rising. I think it could travel to the sun and never get past the Mortem Wall.

Everything falls silent. I look at Rebecca still holding my hand. She

continues looking straight ahead, her eyes unfocused and distant.

There's no sign of the magic that disappeared into the sky. No fire beasts. No Ryan. No crickets chirping. No birds tweeting. Even the air is still. Not a breeze passes me. She won't let me go, so I just wait for whatever's coming next.

'What's happening?' Gabriel yells over.

I shrug. 'I have no idea. Is that it? Is it done?'

Then, from the distance, a low grumbling sound starts. It gets louder and louder. Nearer and nearer. The closer it gets; the more the ground begins to shake. We all turn to the heavens.

'Oh shit.' The magic is crashing back down to the ground, and rushing straight towards me.

It roars and I can do nothing to stop it.

It's coming.

I turn to Gabriel. He looks between me and the roaring above. Grayson is holding him back from the Mortem Wall in case he tries to reach me. Everyone is protecting their ears. The noise is enough to make your nose bleed. I try to pull away from Rebecca, but her hand holds me there.

'I love you,' I tell him. But I know he didn't hear me. But he saw me say the words and that's enough. We watch each other. Comfort each other. But when he glances away from my gaze, I know it's almost here. I don't dare look up. The fear that contorts his features tells me enough.

I see him scream my name. Honestly, by the sound of it, an airplane could be crashing on top of me. I stumble as the ground rattles below my feet. More rocks fall from the edge of the cliff face surrounding me. Everyone shuffles away from the edge, apart from Gabriel and Amara, who are so busy watching me, Grayson and Collins must haul them backwards before they fall.

Gabriel gives one final yell.

I look up and see a ceiling of red fire and energy crashing down.

And then it hits me.

It's like being attacked with a flame thrower charged with a thousand volts of electricity. But a hundred times more powerful and painful. My skin begins to flame. My hands first, in a mix of red and blue and black and white. The flames claim me more and more, crawling up my arms inch by inch. They consume my clothes, covering me with an inferno of power. Lightning too. It crawls across my skin, forces its way down my throat and nose. Everything hurts. My skin. My head. My very soul. I don't know if I should cry or scream. As it stretches across my torso, I feel like I'm burning alive.

And then... *boom!* I feel every muscle tear. My blood boils. Every nerve, every cell, all of me detonates upwards. A tornado of power streams into the sky. I soar in a million pieces, through the air like sand in a storm. And as quickly as I was torn apart, I'm hurled back together again. And once I'm whole, there's no more pain.

The whispers and murmurings, all the million words that poured into my brain, become clear. Become absolute. Rebecca's knowledge and theories and command over her magic, I know it all.

I open my eyes to find myself lying on the ground amongst tall grass, fully clothed and utterly unharmed. I sit and see I'm still at the bottom of the ditch. The Bloodstone remains buried in the earth, bright red and swirling with magic, and whole. The sun is high in the sky and there's not a tree in sight to provide any shade. A moment ago, there was a canopy above me and now... nothing! I get to my feet, looking around, and see I am completely alone.

'Hello?' I call out. 'Gabriel? Amara?' I do a full three-sixty. 'Anyone?'

I wait. Nothing.

I turn my attention to the ridge and start to climb. When I reach the top, I can't believe my eyes.

'What the hell?' I whisper, hauling myself up and planting my feet on the ground. The woods are gone. The densely wooded trail we trekked through has disappeared and in its place, are hills of wild grass and bracken. Wild ponies are running in the distance. Birds soar overhead. The air feels fresher than any air I have ever breathed in.

‘HELLO?!’ I call out. ‘ANYONE?’

‘Hello, Lilly.’

I spin round so fast I almost fall. Standing behind me is Rebecca Hooper, but this time, she is far from ghost-like. Her skin is a healthy pink. Her eyes are a deep hazel. Her blue dress trails elegantly to the floor and she smiles kindly at me.

‘What’s going on?’ I ask warily, looking around for any other threats that may be sneaking up on me. ‘Is this part of the test? Where’s Gabriel?’

‘Your friends are exactly where you left them, Lilly. They are on Dartmoor. In this exact spot, probably wondering where on earth you have gone,’ she chuckles.

‘Okay... then... Where am I?’

‘You are in the Arcane Realm.’ She opens her arms wide. ‘Welcome.’

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? I continue staring at her with my mouth agape.

‘I apologise for the nasty test I put you through back there.’

‘Uh-huh...’ I take a step back, my eyes not daring to look away.

‘I had to see.’ She takes a step closer.

‘See what?’ I take another step away.

‘Why you are here.’ She takes a step towards me and holds up her hands. ‘Please do not fear me. I am not a threat to you.’ She waits and when I nod, she continues. ‘Fear reveals our true self. I saw your fears. I saw why you fear the people you do. And I saw why you are attempting to lower the Veil.’

‘And? What did you see?’

‘That although you are being held captive and forced to do the spell, you are doing it for the right reasons. You are not doing it to start a war. Or for power. Or for revenge. You are doing it to save our

people. And I saw that you will never give into the demands of tyrants again. That is crystal clear to me. You are a very brave and strong young woman. You are reuniting witches with their magic for the right reasons, Lilly Hooper.'

'And if I wasn't?' I ask out of curiosity. 'If you saw something else in my motives?'

'You would be dead. I would have ensured it.' She smirks and tilts her head to the side. 'So your motives are pure. But what of your resolve? Tell me, how far will you go to save them? To save our people?'

'As far as I have to,' I reply.

'Even if it means war? Because war will come. War always comes to those who have more power than others. Five-hundred years, and it will still end the same way. Humans fear what they cannot control. And witches are wild things with wild hearts. No human can tame a witch. As no witch can tame the hatred and fear in a human's soul. Power corrupts, child of my child. And humans are so weak and delicate, they crave it more than any other creature alive.'

'War has already come,' I reply. 'For Hunters and humanity at least. They are doing terrible things in the name of killing us. If we do nothing, we are choosing to be slaughtered.'

'That was the choice I was faced with. Slaughter, or fight. I chose neither.'

'You chose to hide. You sealed away magic and left the Descendants defenseless.' My outburst makes her smile affectionately.

'Spoken like a true warrior. Come.' She turns and starts walking up the hill behind her.

I follow, and we head up, side by side.

'What do you know of the spell I performed?' she asks.

'Not a lot. I have been translating your journal, but you haven't made it easy.'

She chuckles, lifting the hem of her skirt as we continue to climb

the slope. 'No. I did not. But now, you will be able to read it all. The whisperings you heard was all my knowledge. Including the many languages I can read. You must have worked very hard to get to the first stone knowing only English and French.'

'I had help.'

'Ahh... yes.' She looks at me with a glint in her eye. 'I had a peek inside your mind when I brought you here. The middle Mr Kendryk has grown a great deal since I knew him. He is a good man. He was always a good man, truth be told. Easily led, and desperate to please his family, but at heart, a good man.' She nudges me and winks. 'And not too bad to gaze upon, huh?'

I can't help but laugh at her playfulness.

'Well, the spell was of my own design. In truth, I had no idea if it would work, but I had no alternative.' Her face falls and she looks ahead, avoiding my gaze. 'You have heard about the war, but words can never truly do war justice. The things we saw. The pain and suffering that spread across the whole planet. It was indescribable. An evilness covered the globe. It tainted everyone. All of a sudden, in the blink of an eye, we were hated. I thought perhaps that it was just fear. Lies spreading about our wicked intentions. I knew that was a lie when my best friend, a human, turned against us. She was like a sister, really. Her heart was pure. She was the sweetest most loving woman I had ever known. When she was six, her mother died and her father turned to drink and whores. My family took her in. She grew up amongst the witches. She married one. Had a child with him. Then, a year after the first attacks, while we were all in hiding, she led Hunters to her family. She stood in the crowds and cheered at their execution.'

'Oh my god!'

'When I caught up with her, when I saw the way she looked at me, all that hate and disgust, I knew instantly that whoever she was, she was no longer the girl I knew. Whoever was looking at me behind her eyes was not her. Something had happened.' Rebecca looks at me. 'Something on a global scale had changed. It was affecting humanity, turning them into heartless monsters, thirsty for the witch's death and pain. It was not fear and propaganda causing all the hatred. It was a spell. Dark magic.'

‘A witch caused the war?’

‘Yes. A witch started the war, Lilly. A power-hungry witch with a dark agenda. It was the Hunters Mark that led me to the truth.’

‘How? What truth?’

‘The Hunters mark is a poison of hatred and malice. Those who are marked are corrupted by an unwavering desire to not only kill us, but to make us suffer as much as possible. They become obsessed with killing anyone connected to the Arcane Realm. And any human that comes within a ten-mile radius of a Hunters mark, becomes just as obsessed. Hunters were infected with a plague, and they were sent out into the world to spread it. Five-hundred years ago, a witch decided they wanted to kill every other witch on the planet, and they used the Hunters mark to do it.’

‘Why?’

She stops half way up the hill and faces me. ‘Think of the Arcane Realm as a ball of energy.’ She holds out her hand and creates an orb of red energy. ‘When a witch is conceived, their link to the Arcane Realm is instant.’ Small threads of energy leave the ball. Thousands upon thousands of them spread out and disappear across the Moors. One connects to my heart, and another to hers, representing our links. The ball in her hand grows dimmer. ‘The energy will never die, it’s power only ever shared. Now, even with the Veil up, all these strings are still attached to each and every witch. What I did, was block the power.’ She creates a second orb that surrounds the first. Inside the second orb, the threads are still vibrant. But beyond that, on the strings stretching out of sight, they turn black. ‘When you kill the witch, the power returns to the Arcane Realm, ready to be connected to another yet to be born. When the war began, we lost two thirds of our kind.’ She waves her second hand through the strings, severing them so only a third remain. They fade, and the orb, as well as the remaining strings, glow brighter. ‘Look at how bright it is. Look at its power.’ She lifts it higher and we marvel the beauty of it. ‘As the war raged on, and more of us perished, we became stronger. Our powers increased. Witches could access parts of their abilities they never before could. With our friend’s deaths, our strength increased. But despite this, we were not winning. No matter what powers we had, we were dying in droves. The Hunters could find us through our connection to the Arcane Realm. The Mark led them straight to us. With the Veil blocking it, they couldn’t sense us any longer. After a

while, they stopped hunting. They retreated into their forts and castles, training and creating more of their kind, getting ready for our return. With them away from humanity, the hatred faded. The effects of the mark wore off.’ In a swift move, she severs the remaining strings, including ours. The ball returns to its full glory, glimmering and bright. Her eyes lift to mine. ‘What if only one witch remained?’ She creates a single thread. Its intensity is a hundred times stronger than any other thread. ‘What if only one witch had access to the Arcane Realm and they didn’t have to share their power with another?’

‘They would have an unbelievable amount of power.’

‘Yes. They would, wouldn’t they?’ She lowers her hand and the orb fades.

‘So, five-hundred years ago, a witch created the Hunters mark which infected humanity with an unstoppable desire to kill anyone they thought may be a witch, all with the intention of being the last witch left alive, so they alone would have access to the Arcane Realm?’

‘Precisely.’ She nods.

I think back to the actions of the humans at the two museums. Their behavior was certainly irrational. ‘But why would anyone want so much power if they would be forced to live in the world alone, surrounded by humans that hated them? What on earth would drive someone to want to kill thousands of people?’

‘The one who created the mark has made themselves immune from its effects. They control the Hunters. They do not fear them.’

‘But why? Why start the war? Why try and kill us all?’

‘The reason why they did this was the same reason why most do dark and unforgivable things. Power... and love.’ A sad smile appears on her face, and grief settles in her eyes. ‘My mother was a great woman. Her heart was full of love and compassion. She was a true beauty, and the object of many a man’s affection. But although her spirit was vibrant and intoxicating, her body was tired and beaten. Her soul neglected and abused.’ Her face hardens. ‘Soon after I was born, my father changed. He became a cruel and jealous man, with a short temper and quick fists. For both my mother and myself. His

infidelities were countless and it was not long until my mother fell for another. A powerful witch, one who ruled the largest coven in England, fell in love with my mother. But my father discovered them. He murdered her. Burnt her alive and sent the ashes to her lover. I was six. When he told me what he had done, I manifested my first realm of power and murdered him for it. My hair turned red and I became the first Arcane witch in two-hundred years. Ten years later, the war began. It began because my mother's lover wanted to bring her back from the dead. And to do that...'

'He needs full access to the Arcane Realm.'

'Yes. Only that much power would ever allow such an unnatural act as to return the departed back to the world of the living.'

'Your mother... and Theodore Kendryk?' I stagger back, stunned at the realisation. 'That's why he wants to perform the spell to kill all the Descendants? He has no intention of saving any of them, does he?'

'No. He does not. He cares only for my mother. He even killed me in the name of bringing her back.'

'Theo said he loved you. He said he held you in his arms as you lay dying. He says that the spell to kill the Descendants is in your journal.'

'He held me in his arms because he was the one that tortured me to death,' she scoffs, turning away and resuming her trek up the hill. I follow at her side. 'There is no spell to kill all the Descendants, Lilly. I would never create such a thing. The spell he seeks is the one which will return the dead to life.'

'You created that spell?'

'No. It's an ancient spell, thought to be lost to the ages. But Theodore found it shortly after receiving my mother's ashes.' She looks at me and gives me a smug grin. 'I stole it from his mind, and stored it in the pages of my journal. He has no memory of how to bring her back but knows that it is hidden in my journal. The only one alive who can read the spell is you. He wants the journal and he wants you to translate it for him.'

'Then what? Does he need me to do the spell for him?'

'No. He has no need for you beyond reading the journal. He will

kill you and let the Hunters plague continue to spread, making more and more of them, until you are all destroyed. Then he will be the only one connected to the Arcane realm and have the power to perform the resurrection spell.'

'How did Theo kill you? You're an Arcane.'

'He caught up with me as I was creating the last lock of the Veil. I was in a weakened state and he caught me off-guard. You shall see what I mean when you return to your realm,' she adds. 'These spells are draining, to say the least. After each stone, you will need protecting. Ensure you are well guarded as you will never be more vulnerable than in the days following a spell such as this.' She waits for me to show her that I understand. I nod and she carries on. 'When I refused to tell Theo what he wanted to know, after two days of his torture, my body gave out. My soul... or whatever I am... was sent here. I managed to send a message through the Bloodstone for when an Arcane would return to complete the spell, but since that day, I have been here.'

'Hold on, what do you mean, complete the spell? Don't you mean reverse it?'

'No. I mean complete it.' She takes my hand and grins. 'Let me show you.'

We reach the top of the hill.

'What...the...'

Below are stone cottages with thatch roofing. Thriving farms. Small villages and cobbled roads. Wild ponies and sheep. But not a single other person.

'What is this?'

'This is the world, five-hundred years ago, sealed in the Arcane Realm. The spell wasn't supposed to just seal us off from our magic, Lilly. I was only half way through with completing it when I died. I created a plane where only those connected to magic can live. A world separated from humanity. This is the Arcane Realm. The whole planet, in the exact condition it was in on the day I died.' She turns to face me. 'The Hunters mark cannot be removed when the human realm and the Arcane realm are still connected, and they will always be

connected if our kind exist there. For as long as we live in their world, the poison in the Hunters mark will continue to spread. They don't only kill witches. They kill anyone they see as different. No one will ever be free there, Lilly. Humans, they have polluted the land. The sea. The air. They hunt and kill for sport. They go to war and send children to fight their battles. Witches, they are peaceful beings. We protect the earth. We protect each other. Or at least we did before the war. When you complete the spell, when you destroy the locks I put in place while creating this world, every Descendant alive will appear here and all will have access to their magic. And humanity will never find us. The Hunters Marks will fade. The hatred of humanity will die. Peace will return, and we will all survive.'

'This is your plan?' I ask, awestruck.

'This is *our* plan.' She takes my hands in hers and we look into each other's eyes. 'I started the spell. I created this world. And it is *such* a beautiful world. I have seen Paris. Rome. Egypt. I have been across the globe and it is perfection. It is waiting for you all to fill it with life! But I need you to complete the spell, and bring everyone home.' She rests her palm against my cheek. 'Theo will do anything he can to complete his mission. He will create more Hunters. He will hunt you to the end of the earth. Time will be against you, Lilly. The unlocking of the first Bloodstone has started a chain-reaction. At the next Blood-moon, you must unlock the second stone, or this one will reseal, never to be opened again.'

'When is the next Blood-moon?'

'Seventeen weeks from now. If my interpretations of the stars are correct.'

'Will there be more challenges at the next stones?'

'Not like at this one, no.' She sighs heavily and observes me for a moment. 'The road ahead will be hard.'

'The road behind me hasn't been easy,' I reply.

'No. It has not. I do not know what the future holds for you, Lilly Hooper. My visions never blessed me with anything further than this meeting. But I have faith that you will see this through.' Her eyes narrow. 'You will see this through, won't you?'

I let out a breath I hadn't realised I was holding and nod. 'Yes, yes I will see this through. I can do this, Rebecca. I can save us all.' Something behind her catches my eye. 'What the hell is that?'

She glances behind her. In the distance, high up in the sky, is a giant flying bird. 'That?' She looks back at me and laughs. 'That's a dragon, silly. Don't worry. They're herbivores.'

'A d-dragon?'

'Arcane Realm.' She shrugs. 'You will be amazed at what's lurking in here.' Her head whips upwards. 'It is time for you to go. And it is time for my soul to rest now. The first stone has been broken and I am no longer tied to this place.'

Above us, the same noise that almost deafened me back at the Bloodstone begins. I look up and see the ceiling of energy charging down towards me.

Rebecca turns to face me. 'I may not have had a vision of you beyond this meeting, but I do remember telling you this.' I look away from the impending attack above me and look at her smiling at me. 'Your greatest enemy, will become your greatest ally. Trust your instincts when seeking revenge. And forgive, Lilly. You must forgive.'

'What does that mean?' I call over the noise above us.

She reaches out and takes my hand before placing her lips on her wedding ring which is still on my finger, and kisses it. 'A gift for you, for when your heart is broken.' She lets go and steps back.

'WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?' The energy is close now. My ears hurt with the bedlam above.

'I have no idea!' She laughs, shrugging her shoulder and stepping back. 'Good luck, Lilly.' She carries on retreating. I prepare myself for impact. 'Lilly?' she calls. I take a final look at her.

'Yes, Rebecca?'

'Before you go, tell me, do you know if my daughter had a good life? Did she survive the war?' She waits, a hopeful smile on her face. 'Her name was Rose.'

My expression betrays any words of comfort I could have ever had for her.

Her face hardens. 'Who?'

'Grayson. And Theo. I will see her avenged, Rebecca. I swear to you. If it's the last thing I do, they will pay for what they have done.'

She nods firmly, tears sliding down her face.

'I know you will. Good luck, my child.' She blows me a kiss.

The energy slams into me and the exact same torturous explosion happens to my body. Every muscle tears. My blood boils. Every nerve, every cell, all of me detonates upwards. A tornado of power streams into the sky.

And as quickly as I was torn apart, I'm hurled back together again.

I stagger on my feet as the world around me spins. The earth and the trees are scorched. I'm panting. Exhausted and sore. My legs give and I fall into the dirt, naked, with the strength only to look up at the sky above me. My ears are ringing. My head is throbbing and I'm feeling sick as the trees above me continue to spin.

I'm back where I was. Back on the moors in the human realm.

My magic is gone. I lift my hand and look at the ring still on my finger, but the stone has started to fade from the brilliant red, to a clear and plain crystal. And as it does, the magic within it disappears too. Grayson has cut me off from my Bloodstone and once more, I am powerless. I cry out as I lose the source of magic I hoped would help me. How can I do what needs to be done with no magic of my own?

Gabriel falls to his knees by my side, his jacket already off and quickly laid over me as a blanket. He's yelling at me, stroking my face and shaking me. I let out a desperate and angry yell which claims the last of my strength. I'm lost in grief at the lost power supply. And as the magic fades, the new knowledge Rebecca shared with me fades too. It flickers out of my mind like the dying embers of a fire. The magic has gone, and the knowledge along with it. All I remember is what she told me as we walked up that hill.

I lie motionless and spent, understanding now how Theo managed

to kill her without much fuss. Each blink brings more faces. Soon, everyone surrounds me, all talking and yelling at each other. Listening to them argue about what needs to be done with me is too much to bear.

The doctor. A hospital. Sit her up. Keep her still.

‘Clothes,’ I mumble.

‘Don’t worry about that now,’ Gabriel says gently. ‘Let me check you over.’

I groan as he moves me like a doll. It hurts too much. ‘No. Stop. Please, stop. Hurts... Stop.’ I have to whisper. The sound of my own voice is like a hammer in the skull.

‘I’m sorry.’ He lowers me back down gently, placing my head onto the ground with upmost care. ‘Fuck. Okay. Shit... W-what hurts, baby?’

‘Everything.’ I close my eyes. ‘Everything hurts. Clothes!’ Something feels like it’s sliding down the back of my throat. It makes me cough.

‘Fuck!’ Gabriel whispers, horrified as he looks down at me. I’m rolled onto my side so I can cough up the blood stuck in my throat. ‘Lilly? Talk to me, baby. Look at me.’ He inspects my face, searching my eyes with terror. ‘What happened? Where did you go?’ He wipes a streak of blood away from my lip. ‘Grayson, give her access to her magic. Let her heal.’

‘No way.’ He shakes his head, watching me with fear. ‘No way. She’s too strong.’

‘Look at her! She needs to heal!’

‘Tough! As soon as I saw her return, I gave Billy the Bloodstone and sent him away so you couldn’t get it from me.’ Grayson backs away as he looks down at me. ‘She’s too powerful. I will not let her near her Bloodstone ever again.’ He points at me furiously. ‘Where did you go?’

‘Go?’ I groan.

‘You disappeared,’ Gabriel says, clearly distressed. ‘An hour ago.

Grayson tried using the Bloodstone to find you, but we couldn't. I thought...' His eyes brim with tears. 'We thought you had died.' More blood drips from my nose. He turns to Grayson. 'She needs to heal! Get Billy back here! Give her, her Bloodstone!'

'I said no.'

Gabriel is about to attack. Collins rests his hand on his shoulder.

'No,' he warns quietly, glancing over Gabriel's shoulder. 'It's too late. Billy's gone. It's too late.'

I can't keep my eyes open. Gabriel brushes the hair from my face.

'Stay with me. You hear me, Lilly? You stay with me. Stay awake.'

'I-I ca-can't. I-I... It's gone!'

'What's gone, baby?'

'Magic... Magic... Knowledge... It's gone...'

'What is she talking about? What does she mean?' Grayson demands. 'TELL ME! TELL ME OR AMARA DIES!'

Hendrix steps between us and begins trying to calm him down as I lay helpless on the floor. Collins is shielding Amara incase Grayson follows through on his threat, and Gabriel is desperately trying to ease my suffering.

Just before I give into the overwhelming pull towards unconsciousness, I look to the mirage of the Broken Lilly still standing atop the ridge. She's looking to her left. At Connor, who remains up on the ridge alone. A man emerges from the tree line behind him. Broken Lilly watches him walk out and approach Connor from behind.

Jensen Hartley.

He carries on calmly walking towards the unsuspecting Connor as I struggle to get any words out to warn him that death is coming! But death is not coming. Not for Connor. Jensen stops by his side. They look at each other. Connor's not surprised to see him there. They share a slight nod and then both men look down at us all in the ditch. They both pull out guns from their waistbands and points them downwards

at us.

Gabriel sees the look on my face and lifts his gaze to see what has me so wide-eyed.

The two men above us open fire. We're fish in a barrel and everyone is too distracted by me and what just happened to see them, never-mind react.

The first to be hit is Hendrix, taking three shots to the chest. He spins before falling into the dirt.

The second, Grayson. He takes four and lands on his back.

The third... me.

Everything goes black.

The sound of breaking glass wakes me with a jolt. I'm surprised that I wake at all. I thought for sure the bullet that hit me in my chest was going to kill me. I blink a few times to clear the sleepy vision that remains and see I'm in an unfamiliar room that smells heavily of dust and damp. I can't see anyone else in here with me and the part of the room I do see shows me nothing but closed floral curtains, peeling and dirty striped wallpaper and old wicker furniture.

I strain my ears for any hint that I'm not alone. I hear nothing, so slowly, I roll over.

I'm alone.

I toss off the covers, lift my hand to my chest and find no trace of a bullet wound, and what's more, I'm dressed. Someone's put me in a tank top and a pair of black leggings. I push myself up and every muscle in my body complains. I feel like I've run a marathon, but other than that, I'm unharmed, unchained and utterly confused.

'Where the hell am I?' I whisper under my breath. And then I remember.

Connor and Jensen. They shot Grayson! If he's dead, then Gabriel is too. I reach out my hand, hoping that I will sense him.

Nothing. I feel no magic here whatsoever.

But I do hear muffled voices beyond the closed door. Quietly, I get to my feet and make my way across the bedroom and as quietly as I can, open it up.

I peer out through a crack, and still, no people. Just an empty landing with brown floral carpets and an additional two closed doors. I see a flight of stairs straight ahead. The ceilings are low and held up with woodworm infested dark oak beams.

'Seriously, where the hell am I?'

My attention quickly shifts to the stairs when I hear the distant voice of Jensen below. He's talking to someone. Connor. That Irish accent is unmistakable.

Fucking traitor.

I trusted him. I trusted him and called him friend and all this time he was with them! With Jensen and Theo.

I sneak out onto the landing, careful to find and avoid any creaking floorboards. I'm good at sneaking and moving around unheard. Living at Harry's, I had to be. I reach the stairs and lean over the bannister. It's a single flight that goes to another hallway. This

house is old, modest and small. I make my way down as silent as a mouse. I reach the hall and see a small beam of light coming from a slightly ajar door. The same door that their voices are coming from. I get closer. It's a kitchen. Again, it's old and dated. I see Connor sweeping up broken glass from the floor with a dustpan and brush. He looks tired and pale as he tips it into the bin. But behind him, leaning casually against the counter with a bottle of beer in his hand, is Jensen. He talks calmly and at ease to Connor. Jensen has kidnapped me, maybe murdered my fiancé, and probably my best friend, as well as dear Collins. I notice a loaf of bread left on the table with a few slices cut away, and a lovely sharp knife left beside it.

I crash through the door with a furious scream and grab the knife. Connor gives a yell and leaps out the way as I go for Jensen. The knife is up by my head and I'm ready to plunge it into his neck. He's startled by my sudden appearance and drops the beer while stumbling back in shock. I'm going at him with everything I have. Before I get close enough, I'm tackled by a third person I didn't see from behind, and together we roll over the table before crashing to the floor. I'm screaming. Threatening death to everyone for what they've done. My attacker pins me to the floor and grabs my wrists.

'GET OFF!' I scream, flailing and thrashing violently. 'I'M GOING TO KILL YOU FOR KILLING GABRIEL! YOU'RE A DEAD MAN!'

'I'm right here, you lunatic!' Gabriel yells, grabbing my knife-wielding hand. 'I'm right here! Look!' He gives me a firm shake. 'Look, Beautiful. Look!'

I stare up, blinking in shock as Gabriel pins me beneath him. He looks down at me and waits for me to calm.

'Gabriel?' I whisper. 'Y-you're alive?'

'Of course I'm alive.' He glances at the knife still in my hand then back to me. 'Unless you plan on stabbing me that is? Didn't you sense my magic?'

'I... I...' Shaking my head, I tell him, 'I can't sense any magic. It must be the spell, Rebecca said I would be weak...'

'Rebecca said what?'

I look over at Jensen and again I fill with fury. '*You!* I'm going to KILL YOU!' I shove Gabriel off me and scramble up to my feet, screaming wildly and bloodthirstily as I once more go for Jensen. He simply backs up with his hands by his head in surrender.

Gabriel takes my waist and holds me back. I kick out and brandish the knife in the air, screaming death threats at Jensen who lunges back from my assault.

'Fuck...' Gabriel groans as he struggles to keep hold of me. 'When did you get so strong? Calm the fuck down!'

'Lilly, please, I'm not going to hurt you,' Jensen says in a bid to

settle me.

It doesn't work.

All I know is I want to kill! I *need* to kill him! I carry on shrieking furiously, slicing at the air and trying to break free of Gabriel's grip.

'She's insane,' Jensen mutters, which only makes me yell and thrash harder. Gabriel groans and struggles to hold me back.

'Here's a fucking idea, Jensen,' Gabriel barks from behind me, lifting my feet off the floor. 'How about you shut the fuck up before she skins you alive, yeah?'

'LET ME GO!'

'No chance, Beautiful. You need to calm – ARGH!' I hurl the back of my head into his nose. He doesn't relinquish his hold but he sounds really pissed the next time he speaks. 'Calm your crazy arse down before I compel you to! You hear me?! HEY! DO YOU FUCKING HEAR ME?!' He gives me a shake and tightens his hold so it's almost painful. His chin rests on my shoulder. 'Drop the knife before you hurt someone.'

'I don't want to hurt him. I want to *kill* him!' I growl.

'Well, you can't kill him!'

'Yeah?' I holler. 'And why the hell can't I?'

'Because he's your dad, Lilly!' Gabriel tells me. My efforts to get free stop as I look into the emerald eyes in front of me. 'And if it wasn't for him, we'd still be Grayson's prisoners. He's your dad, Beautiful.'

My eyes narrow on Jensen. 'I know.'

'You know?' Gabriel replies.

'Of course she knows,' Jensen says, stepping closer to me slowly, his eyes glancing briefly to the knife still in my hand. 'She's no fool. Are you, Buttons?'

'Come one more step and I'll slit your throat,' I snarl venomously. Wisely, he stops. Gabriel turns me so I can't see Jensen.

'Collins?' I gasp in relief. He's standing by the door shielding a very pale Amara behind him. 'Amara? You're both here? You're both okay?'

'We're fine, Honey,' Amara insists, pushing him out the way with a tut and making her way over. She takes the knife from my hand and shows me her sweetest smile. 'Now, can you calm down so we can explain? You're freaking me out.'

I look around the odd little kitchen. At Collins, Amara and Connor who are all watching me anxiously. 'I'm freaking *you* out? What the hell is going on? Where are we? Why the hell is Jensen here?' I kick Gabriel in the shin. 'And let me go, you bloody ape! I can't breathe.' He releases me and my feet return to the floor, but my outburst was too much for what my body's been through and I stumble, dizzy and

weak.

He grabs my elbow to steady me. 'Easy. Take it easy. That sedative was really strong.'

'You've been out cold for nearly twenty hours,' Connor adds, pulling out a chair for me.

'Well then, maybe you should have thought about that before SHOOTING ME!' I yell at him.

'You weren't supposed to get hit,' Connor mumbles. 'I was aiming for Grayson.'

'Grayson? Grayson!' I spin around and scour every corner of the room. But I don't see him. 'Where is he? GRAYSON WILL KILL YOU! Oh... I don't feel so good.'

The room starts to spin and my head starts to thump.

Gabriel catches my weight as I lose my balance. 'You're still not on top form from the spell. You need-'

'Will everyone stop telling me what I need! I know what I need.'

'Then what do you need, Honey?' Amara asks resting her hand on my back.

'I need to know what's going on. I need to know where Grayson and my Bloodstone are. I need to know why he is here.' I point at Jensen. 'And... I think I need to sit down,' I add quietly. 'Before I throw up.'



With a cup of sweet tea in my hands, I sit at the kitchen table with the others. Gabriel pulls my chair as close to him as possible and rests his hand gently on mine, all the while, I glare at Jensen with a murderous rage as he lingers by the sink.

'You can't feel my magic, Beautiful?' Gabriel asks softly. His fingers massage mine, as if helping the blood flow will encourage my Sensativa to awaken.

'No,' I reply, my teeth grinding together and my attention remaining on Jensen. 'I can't.'

'What's wrong with her?' he asks Connor.

'It was the spell. I'll be fine,' I snap impatiently, finally relinquishing from my loathsome glaring and instead looking into Gabriel's concerned eyes. 'Tell me what's going on, Gabriel. Where's Grayson?'

'Grayson isn't here. He still has your Bloodstone, but-'

'Then he's coming!' I stand, the chair legs scrape against the tiled floor as I do. 'We run off. He's going to tear you all apart when he catches us.'

'But!' Gabriel snaps, yanking my chair so I get swept off my feet

and return to sitting. 'Thanks to Connor, we can't be found. Even with Grayson holding your Bloodstone.'

'Well, more thanks to Rebecca than me. It was something she wrote in her journal about avoiding tracer spells.' Connor points at my wrist. I hadn't noticed, but I'm wearing a cuff. A leather one. It has odd carvings etched into it. 'It's a delay,' Connor explains as I examine it. 'We can't hide you completely, but with the markings on the cuff shielding you, you're off kilter with the Bloodstone, timewise.'

'And in English?'

'Basically, Whenever Grayson looks for you, he'll see your location six hours, six minutes and six seconds previously.'

'Riiight...' I carry on looking at the cuff, wondering how exactly. 'Six-six-six. What's bad luck about that?' I look at Gabriel. 'So, this was your plan? Team up with long-lost dad and do a runner? Then what? Keep running? I don't have my magic because I don't have my Bloodstone.' I can't help the venom I spit at him. In truth, I'm so relieved he's alive and well after thinking he had been shot. But my anger and hatred that Jensen's presence has stirred is powerful. Too powerful.

'Well, the plan was to get your Bloodstone first, but you disappeared and we all started to think you were dead, and then you came back in all this fire and energy and I was just so relieved to see you...' His face pales at the memory of my sudden and violent departure. 'No one noticed Grayson sending Billy away with it.' He nods to Jensen. 'We would have gotten you out sooner, but I needed to make sure Amara and Collins were with us before we left. If we left them behind, Grayson would have hurt them in order to get us back, and-'

'Could have let me take her before the spell was started though... couldn't you?' Jensen snaps. 'She could have died! I thought that she had! If I'd have known that spell was going to be that dangerous, I would never have allowed you to let her do it.'

'What? Are you worried that Theo would be upset I almost died?'

'I think it's pretty obvious I'm not with Theo any longer.'

'I'll just take your word for it, shall I?' I sneer in response.

'How about the fact I'm here! How about the fact that I have abandoned the people I have lived with my entire life, left my home and sided with their enemy, all in the name of helping you! Does that convince you of my loyalties? My priorities? If they ever see me again, they will kill me, Lilly. A bit of gratitude might be nice!'

'Gratitude?' I hiss. Slowly, I rise. The chair legs scrape along the tiles and everyone falls into a deathly silence. 'Gratitude?' I repeat, walking towards him, my fists clenched and my jaw locked. I stand before him almost nose to nose. 'GRATTITUDE?!'

‘Yes!’ he barks back. ‘Gratitude!’

Thump.

I punch him in the face. It hurts me like hell but I’m so angry I don’t even care.

‘Christ... Where the hell did you learn to punch so hard?’ he snaps, clutching his bloody nose.

‘Thank you! Thank you, Jensen. Please... Accept my unwavering and absolute fucking gratitude!’ I slam my fist into his arm. He holds it protectively and takes a step back. ‘Thank you for abandoning me as a child.’ *Whack.* ‘For leaving me to be raised by a child-beating lunatic!’ *Whack.* ‘For dragging me into a tent with Theo and watching as he tortured me and the man I love!’ *Whack. Whack.* Gabriel is on his feet, trying to stop me, more so I don’t hurt myself than to spare Theo any injury. I shove him away hard, he stumbles back, knocking into the counter. He looks past me to Jensen, who gestures for him to stay out of it. ‘Thank you for doing nothing, as Theo cut off my fingers!’ I thrust my three-fingered hand in Jensen’s face, and hot, hateful tears spring into my eyes. ‘The cutters were filthy. I almost died of blood poisoning! But thanks, *Dad!* Truly.’ I wipe away my tears just as they start to fall, hating that I’m letting him see me so affected by his betrayals. ‘You have my gratitude. So, so much of my gratitude.’

‘Theo wasn’t meant to go that far,’ he replies shamefully, looking at the floor and rubbing the bruise I have put on his arm. ‘He said he was just going to scare you.’

‘Scare me?’ I scoff. ‘You saw the cutters. You saw him use them on me. TWICE!’

‘I stopped him!’ he insists, like that’s any form of justification. ‘You passed out, but I did stop him. Tell her, Gabriel. Tell her-’

I take some hurried steps towards him and his eyes widen. His back presses against the kitchen counter as I stand on my tip-toes. ‘Like I said... *thanks.*’ The distrust and loathing on my face upsets him. I don’t give a damn.

‘There are reasons-’

‘None I’m interested in hearing.’ I step away, shaking my head. ‘The things that happened to me in that house... Mum died there! If I misbehaved, Harry would tether me up to a post in the garden, like a dog, naked, and hungry...for days! Have you ever been so hungry, you spent the night hunting spiders?!’

‘Lilly... I had no idea-’

‘Nothing you could ever say to me would let me forgive you for abandoning me to Harry. For turning on me and my mum and sending Theo to come and take me away.’

‘That’s not-’

‘I’m not interested. You don’t deserve my forgiveness, and if I had my magic right now, I would kill you. Know that, Jensen.’ I jab him in the chest, right over his black heart, and deliver my next words with conviction. ‘I. Would. Kill. You.’

I turn and head to the door. As I open it, he calls after me, ‘I didn’t leave you! Lilly... I never left you or your mum. She took you. She stole you from me.’

My hand rests on the door handle, but my feet remain firmly planted on the kitchen floor.

‘I don’t know exactly what happened to you after I lost you when you were four. And to be honest, I’m not too clear on what happened before you and your mum left either. But, I can tell you what I do know, and then maybe you’ll see that I’m not the evil, dead-beat dad you think I am.’

When I peer at him over my shoulder, he takes a cautious step forwards, his eyes pleading with me to hear him out.

‘Every story has two sides. You know yours. Please... please, Lilly. Let me tell you mine.’



The others remain in the kitchen as Jensen and I head in to a dusty and dated lounge with brown sofas covered in tassels. Jensen sits and swiftly stands again, coughing and batting the air as he gets covered in a cloud of dust.

‘Christ. Your boyfriend might want to learn how to use a vacuum cleaner.’

‘Fiancé. And I think vacuum cleaning is the least of our problems right now.’ I lean against the wall close to the door, my arms folded across my chest. ‘Talk then.’

‘I don’t really know where to begin.’

‘I was four. One day you were there. The next you weren’t. Theo was. Start there. Where did you go? Another woman? Decided you didn’t want to be a dad anymore?’

‘No. It was nothing like that. I loved you and your mum.’

‘Loved. Past tense, huh?’

‘I still love you both. Of course I do.’

‘Well, Mum’s dead, and I hate you. So that feeling is not reciprocated.’

‘Look. I get that you’ve had a shit time. I do. But you’re not the only person here who has lost people. Who has suffered.’

‘You didn’t lose your family, Jensen. You abandoned them. Handed them to Theo. And you think you’ve suffered?’ I scoff. ‘You don’t know the *meaning* of the word!’ I laugh and shake my head. ‘You have no

idea.'

'I lost my family.'

'So did I.'

He takes a calming breath, refusing to give in to my argumentative attitude. 'What do you remember of your mum?'

'That she loved me.'

'What else?'

I think back to the woman who I barely remember. And the more I think, I realise that I have very few memories of her before Harry's house. There are a few glimpses, her cooking over an old stove in a wooden cabin. Her, brushing my hair. 'At Harry's, she would read to me every night.'

'Brothers Grimm?'

'Yeah. How did you know that?'

He chuckles softly. 'That was my book. I used to read it to you every night before you went to sleep. Without exception. You refused to go to bed unless I did.' He smiles fondly at his memory. 'God, you loved Cinderella.'

'I still do. It's my favourite. Gabriel's learnt it off by heart and he recites it to me nearly every night.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'What else do you remember... about your mum?'

I shake my head. 'Not much. How about you tell me what I should remember.'

He scratches the very edge of his nose as he organises his thoughts. I wait, filled with dread over what he is about to say, because he does not look like a man about to tell a happy story.

'You started having nightmares,' he starts.

'What kind of nightmares? What about?'

'You kept screaming about a monster hurting you. You would thrash so much when you were in your bed, you would wake up covered in bruises. The only way you would sleep was in my arms. For weeks, I cradled you and held you so you could rest, and the nightmares stopped. You seemed to settle. So I put you back into your bed.' His emerald eyes look into mine. 'I went out that night for a couple of hours. When I came back, you were beyond terrified. Sat in the corner of your room almost catatonic, and then I noticed two of your fingers were broken. You wouldn't tell me what had happened. You said you couldn't remember, and when I asked your mum, she said that you had had a nightmare and lashed out. Hit your hand on the wall. But something didn't feel right. So, I asked Theo to come and check you over.'

'Theo?'

He nods. 'You were born in my camp. In Theo's camp. I've been with him since I was born. My family have always been with him. All the way back to the war.'

'I was born... a Traitor?'

'We actually call ourselves Ramblers. Not Traitors. But yes, you were. And your name isn't actually Lilly Hooper. It's Lilly Calla Hartley.'

'Calla?' I test the name on my tongue. It feels as pretty as it sounds. 'Hartley...' That, doesn't feel as good.

'Your mother chose your first names. Calla was her name.'

'I... I never knew that.'

He puffs out his cheeks and raises his brow. 'What we don't know about your mum could probably fill a library. I'll tell you what I do know. Or rather, what she told me.' His eyes narrow. 'If... you want to hear it.'

After a moment of contemplation, I nod and push myself from the wall and take a seat on the sofa. He joins me.

'She ran away from home when she was twelve. She said she lived in one of the Nomad camps, but didn't agree with how they lived. She didn't want the veil to be lowered because she believed it would start a war, so she ran away. Theo found her living on the streets and brought her to us. I liked her as soon as I saw her. We grew up together. She dated a lot of guys. Drove me crazy.' He scratches the end of his nose again and takes a second before continuing. I sit, riveted by these insights into my lost life. 'On her seventeenth birthday, I asked her out. The rest, as they say...' He looks at me and I see a hint of a sad smile. 'You look so like her. Except the hair and eyes of course. You definitely have her fiery temper,' he laughs.

'Then what?' I'm not interested in sentimentality.

His smile fades. 'We had you. Everything was fine. But when you turned four, you started having those nightmares.' He swallows hard. 'I asked Theo for his help.' I scoff, and he agrees with my derisive reaction with a nod. 'He told me to wait at his cabin while he spoke to you and your mum. A couple of hours later, he returned with a gash across his face. He told me... He said...'

'What?' He looks lost in confusion as he sifts through the memories of what happened.

'When he turned up, she was holding your arm over a fire.'

'Bull. No way.'

'I'm telling you what he told me. He said he walked in. You were screaming and she was holding your arm over the flames in the fire place, yelling at you. He demanded to know what the hell she was doing. She attacked him with a knife, took you, and ran.'

'That's a lie. Theo's lying to you to hide the fact that he tried to kill

your child. He-'

He raises his hand. 'I know that now. I'm telling you what happened then. And then I will tell you what happened in the last few months. Okay?' I close my mouth and let him continue. 'We came to the conclusion that she was hurting you. That she was the one causing the bruises and broken bones.'

'So she took me, and you what? Let her? Why didn't you look for me? If you knew she was hurting me, why-'

'I did. Oh, Lilly, I looked everywhere. The woman I loved had taken my little girl and was hurting her! I was insane with worry. Theo was just as desperate to find you. But then Theo and I found the car she took. It had crashed and burnt. Inside were two bodies. A girl about your age and a woman wearing your mothers wedding ring. We assumed the worst. We obviously assumed wrong. Your mum was clever. Cunning. Cruel. And I had no idea what she was capable of. And I am sorry I stopped looking for you. I truly had no idea you were still alive until four months ago. If I had known, I would have come to get you from your uncle. I swear it.'

'Instead, you learn I'm alive and hand me to Theo for torture?'

'My missing daughter turned up at the house of my enemy. My missing daughter turned out to be The Arcane witch! You were helping Grayson do something that I had spent my entire life trying to stop from happening. And when Theo tried to talk to you at Christmas, when he came to talk to you at the Christmas tree lot, he told me you attacked him.'

'Theo attacked me!' I insist. 'I was just there to buy a Christmas tree! He didn't want to talk. He hit, he tortured and he threatened me. And if he told you anything different, he's lying.'

'I know that now. I didn't know that then. The way he told me, he attacked after you attacked him first. You made it clear where your allegiances lied. You were going to bring down the veil and help Grayson start a war against humanity. He even said that you made a promise that you would make every last human suffer before you killed them. He said you were evil, and soulless.'

'He didn't even give me a chance to speak before he attacked. I said no such thing.'

'I get that now. I didn't then.' He takes another deep and readying breath. 'After everything that happened at the camp, the night Theo hurt you, I started having my doubts. You were so adamant that you didn't want anyone to die. That handing over the journal so he could kill the Nomads, was not something you could live with. When you insisted that you had no intention of starting a war, I saw no lie in your eyes. None. Theo had spent so long telling me that you wanted to start a war. That you sided with Grayson in killing humanity. That

you were evil, I believed him. But then I saw you, and I didn't see any of that in you. The pain you were in was unbearable to witness and you took it all to save lives. When we left you alone to talk in the tent, I told Theo I didn't think you were wicked. That you were simply lost, stuck... trapped. But then Tobias turned up, and Grayson, and everything went straight to hell. When I saw you... kill my men...'

'I should never have done that,' I whisper in shame, shaking my head and wishing away the images from that night. 'I had just learnt something so terrible, and I was so upset, I couldn't control myself.'

'I am sure there is a reason for what you did. If you want to tell me, then you can, but first I must finish telling you my story. If that's alright?' I nod. 'After you escaped, we went into hiding. Theo was hurt, he wanted to heal before attacking Grayson to get you back. I told him I didn't believe that you wanted what he thought you wanted. I told him that I thought you were in trouble. He wouldn't listen. He just kept telling me over and over "Lilly is a dark soul who wants the world to burn. We must get her and the journal if we ever hope to save our people and save humanity. Killing Grayson's Descendants is all that matters". It was all he would say.'

'You didn't believe him?'

'No. I believed you. I snuck into Theo's cabin. I found a notebook. A diary. It listed, in detail, all the things that he and your mother did to you as a child. Turns out Theo knew who Calla was. He knew she was a Hooper. She *had* run away from home, that much was true. Your grandfather wasn't a nice man, by all accounts. A bit happy with his fists. Calla knew about the Nomads, as well as the Ramblers. She chose to come to us for sanctuary.'

'I bet. If the alternative was Grayson, I may have sought you out too.'

'Indeed. She made a deal with Theo that if he took her in, she would marry for love and have a child. She believed his lies too and knew that an Arcane was needed to stop the war from ever happening. In the journal, he kept track of absolutely every detail of his efforts to make you manifest. He tried fear. Anger.' His eyes go dark. 'Pain. I sat there, reading about how he slowly twisted your fingers until they snapped. How he used his magic on you. And he was frustrated with you because you weren't manifesting. It was like reading the inner ramblings of a mad man and it made me sick to my stomach.' He reaches into his pocket and hands me a small mole-skin notebook. The pages are dog-eared and discolored. The cover furls at the edges, indicating not only its age, but its repetitive use. 'Here. I stole it.'

I take it and flick through the pages. I see the notes he was referring too. The details of my suffering. And also, his most private and deranged thoughts. 'Funny thing is, Grayson has this exact list,' I

add, thinking back to the night he ticked off the causes of my manifestations. 'Like father like son, hey.'

'Theo was working with your mum to get you to manifest your magic. I'm not entirely sure what caused your mum to flee after you finally did. Maybe she changed her mind and wanted to protect you.' He leans over and flicks through the pages, landing on the final one that says simply "*Calla knows the truth*".

'Truth?' I ask. But he shrugs.

'My guess? She learnt something about why he wanted you to manifest, and didn't like it.'

I close the book and hand it back with a shrug.

'You seem to be taking this well.'

'I have the advantage of knowing that you're lying. Carry on,' I encourage. 'Let me hear the rest of your lies.'

'I'm not lying.'

'Carry on or I leave,' I say simply.

He grunts under his breath, and carries on. 'I went looking for Gabriel. He damn near killed me when he saw me in London a few weeks back. While that oaf, Billy, was talking to market stall vendors, I approached Gabriel and asked him if you were in trouble. If you needed saving from Grayson. After he beat the shit out of me, he said yes. I told him what I knew and said I would help him save you. I never went home. Theo has been looking for me ever since. To kill me and get that notebook back.'

'Cool story. A load of utter rubbish though, but exciting to hear nonetheless. Can't believe Gabriel believed you.' I laugh, shaking my head and getting to my feet. 'You can leave now. I don't want you here.'

'Remember when I told you that she dated a lot of guys?' he asks, standing up with me. I turn and roll my eyes at his insistence on continuing this nonsense. 'When I think back, it was like she was looking for something. And when I finally plucked up the courage to tell her how I felt, she stopped looking. I loved her straight away. And she loved me. I think that was the only truth your mother ever really had in her life. I think that love was what she was looking for.' He lifts his gaze. 'Because she knew she needed it to make you.'

After a few slow and purposeful steps forwards, I stop before him. 'Are you telling me, with complete sincerity, that you believe my mother only had me, to make a witch?'

'It certainly looks that way.'

'And that she hurt me to make me manifest?' I snarl.

'I am and I am sorr-'

'You... are a fucking liar!'

'Lilly, you were four. There are probably memories in there that are

locked up. You were always getting hurt. I thought you were just adventurous and accident prone. But looking back, it was her. Her and Theo.'

'You want to take away one of the only person I remember loving me. That's just cruel.' The constriction in my throat grows more unbearable. 'You're lying.'

'I love you. I loved you then and I love you now. You were my Buttons. You held me together.' He reaches out and rests his hand on mine, but I quickly pull away.

'YOU'RE A FUCKING LIAR!' I yell. 'A LIAR AND A TRAITOR AND... AND... CRUEL!' I push him away. 'My mum loved me. She loved me. You don't get to tell lies and take her away from me!'

'I'm not lying, Buttons.'

I walk out the door and storm through the hallway towards the kitchen. When I crash through the door, everyone jumps to their feet. I go straight to a worried Gabriel and take his hands. 'You need to look into my memories. Right now.'

He glances at Jensen behind me who has followed me in.

'You told her?'

Jensen nods sadly.

'He's lying! My mum would never do that to me. She would never have had me just to make a witch and then help Theo hurt me.' Tears spill down my cheeks as I violently shake my head. My hair tumbles over my face and he brushes it out of the way. 'Look into my memories, Gabriel. Prove he's lying.'

'I don't think that's wise,' Gabriel says. 'Jensen's telling the truth, Lilly.'

I take his hands and slam them onto the side of my head. 'Please. I am begging you.' He still hesitates. 'Please!'

'Let her see, Gabriel,' Jensen encourages gently. 'If it's the only way for her to trust me, show her.'

I spin round to him and spit the words, 'I will *never* trust you.' turning back to Gabriel, I plead with him. 'Look. I'm begging you. He can't take my mum away from me. I won't let him.'

His hands slide into my hair and his fingertips press into my skull. His eyes go black, and together, we travel back to see. I see Jensen and me, playing. A lot. We're outside, in the forest, playing hide-and-seek. Hunting woodpeckers. Collecting chestnuts. Fishing in the lake. Inside the cabin, he watches me with awe as I scribble with crayons or create dolls with clothes pegs. I see him reading to me, over and over, as I sit comfortably in his lap, playing with his ponytail. We sit on the porch and he teaches me how to make daisy chains. All the things I thought I did with my mother, I did with him! And in the background, my mother lingers, watching with a scowl. There's jealousy in her eyes

as she spectates our time together. Then, I see her letting Theo into my room. I see her watch as he hurts me. As he threatens to take my dad away if I tell him what he's doing. My mother barely flinches as I cry. Gabriel is by my side the whole time, watching me, but never saying a word.

'Show me what happened to make us leave,' I request, in little more than a strained whimper.

'Are you sure-'

'Show me.'

The scenes fade to an image of Theo holding a four-year-old Lilly's hand over an open fire. She's screaming and trying so hard to pull away. She pleads with her mummy to help her, and I openly start to sob at the cold indifference my mother has to her suffering. Gabriel's hand tightens in mine. Then... she manifests, and sends a knife at Theo. He lets her go and she falls to the floor holding her badly burnt arm to her chest. Theo laughs as he wipes the blood from his face, and goes insane with joy. He rants and raves like a lunatic, laughing and clapping with glee.

'Now all I need is the journal, and the spell will once more be mine!' he boasts to himself as he begins pacing back and forth. 'I will send word to the Hunters, get them out and searching. I will need to create more. The Descendants won't survive the year with all the weapons they have at their disposal. One large wave of attacks and the Descendants will all perish-'

'Nomads,' Calla corrects him. 'You mean... the Nomads will perish. The Ramblers will be okay... won't they?' She steps back. 'Jensen and I will be safe, right?'

Theo turns to her, a cruel and twisted grimace on his face.

'You, and all of your pathetic kind will be dead. You vile, disgusting, half-rate excuse of a Descendent.' He snatches little Lilly's arm. 'I have my Arcane witch.' His lightning starts to crackle on his palm. 'I have no need for you any longer, Calla. And I can't have you telling anyone any of this.'

'I won't tell anyone! Keep the child, but spare Jensen and me! Please!'

'Sorry. If I am going to succeed in returning my Abigail to me, you must all perish. Every, single one of you.' He starts his attack, shooting his lightning at her until she falls to the floor, screaming and writing in agony. She cries out for little Lilly to help her.

'Save your mummy,' she wails. 'Lilly! My daughter! Save me!'

Theo is hurled across the room, smashing through the window and far into the woods. Calla is up on her feet, and dragging a traumatised little Lilly out the front door. Everything turns fuzzy and my memories are distorted until we arrive at Harrys house. I remember all this.

Living in the attic with her. Six months we stayed there. She was a good mother in those few months. She played with me. Read to me. Hugged me. Nothing like she was at the cabin.

‘Gabriel...’ I whisper. ‘Compel me to show you the night she died.’

‘Are you sure?’ he asks.

I nod, unable to find the courage to form the words. He compels me, and we arrive in the bathroom of my uncle’s home. It’s dark outside. Through the window, fireworks light up the sky.

Little Lilly is sat in the bath, sleepy and mumbling, rubbing her eyes and asking her mummy why she is sitting in the bath with her clothes on.

Calla strokes her hair and smiles a gentle and comforting smile at her. ‘There’s a bad man out there, Lilly. And he wants to hurt me. He wants to hurt your daddy. You don’t want him to hurt your daddy, do you?’

Little Lilly shakes her head, barely able to keep her eyes open. She’s been drugged. It’s as clear as day that she has some kind of sedative in her system.

‘Are you sleepy, baby?’ Calla asks her.

Little Lilly nods.

After a kiss to her forehead, little Lilly is lowered into the water. ‘Then go to sleep, baby. Go to sleep.’

Little Lilly is submerged. After a few seconds, she starts to kick and thrash, spilling water all over the bathroom tiles. Calla pins her down. There’s no grief on her face or pain as she tries to drown her own child. She’s cold and hard. Dare I say... hateful?

‘You will not be used to kill my Jensen. I will not lose him. I will never lose him. Not to you, and not to Theo-’

The water in the tub explodes. The bath cracks and chunks of porcelain shatters like shrapnel. Calla is hurled back, her head connects with the wall with a heavy thud, and she falls to the floor, unresponsive, with blood seeping from her head. Little Lilly lays motionless in the bath, except for the odd little splutter as she clears her airway. When Harry starts pounding on the door, Gabriel lets me go and I return to the kitchen.

There are absolutely no words that can be said. Nothing to be done to make the pain in my heart and soul any easier to bear. No sobbing leaves me, just silent tear after silent tear. Gabriel cups my face in his hands and rests his forehead against mine.

‘I am so sorry,’ he whispers sadly, catching my tears and wiping them clear with his thumbs.

I return his hands to the side of my head. ‘Compel me to show you what happened after the spell.’

‘Don’t you need some time? Do you want to talk? Maybe-’

‘Just... look.’ I have no energy or want to say another word, and he needs to learn the truth about what Theo has planned as soon as possible. As well as the truth of what the spell will actually do when it is completed. When he finishes looking, he releases me and steps back with wide eyes.

‘That’s... that’s the spell?’ he murmurs. I nod as more tears spill down my cheeks. ‘And Theo... he plans to-’

‘Yes.’ I lift my gaze to Jensen who is stood by the door, desperately looking between Gabriel and me but not asking a single question about what he saw. Theo was telling the truth. He was a loving father. A devoted husband. And my mother was a heartless monster. ‘Can you tell the others?’ I ask Gabriel as he uses the cuff of his jumper to dry my tears. ‘I... I can’t... I need to...’

‘What do you want me to tell them?’

I look around the whole room. My eyes meet Collins, Amara, Connor and Jensen. ‘Tell them everything. All of it. Tell Jensen about Toby and Harry’s house. Tell them about the spell. Just...’ I sigh, defeated and devastated. ‘Tell them all everything.’ I start walking to the door, almost stumbling as I walk. I think I’m in shock. Jensen steps aside to let me pass.

‘Are you okay, Buttons?’

I stop and look up at him. ‘You told me your story. And I believe you. You asked to hear mine. When Gabriel tells you, you may wish you hadn’t.’

Amara appears beside me and takes my hand in hers. ‘Come on, Honey. I’ve got you.’ She pecks my cheek. ‘I’ve always got you. Let’s go upstairs, hmm?’

‘Yes please.’

With my head rested on her shoulder, we go upstairs, and Gabriel gets started in explaining everything to them all.



‘You alright, my love?’ Gabriel asks gently, running his hands along my arm and leaning in to kiss the top of my head. I’ve been laying on the bed with my head on Amara’s lap for a while, my face buried into her stomach.

‘My whole life is a lie,’ I murmur, not rolling over. ‘My mum never loved me.’

He can’t even try to comfort me. Not with this. ‘I love you, if that’s any consolation.’

‘Me too,’ Amara adds sweetly.

I give a little snuffle.

‘We need to get on the road within the hour,’ he whispers to

Amara. 'Why don't you go pack up and see Collins. He'll fill you in on a few things.'

'Where's Jensen?' she asks in a hush.

'He's downstairs. He's... um... processing. Learning about Lilly's life wasn't easy listening.'

'Did you tell him all of it?' she asks.

'Most of it. He knows about Toby and Harry. About...' He leans into her ear. 'The baby.' No matter how quiet they speak, I can hear them clearly. But I'm so emotionally spent I just lie here. 'Go on, sweetheart. Go find Collins. We need to keep ahead of the Bloodstone delay. I've got her.' He scoops me up in his arms and stands. My face buries into his chest as she gets up and leaves. When the door closes, he sits on the floor with his back resting against the bed and cradles me close. Resting my ear close to his heart, I listen to the *thump thump* beneath his chest.

'Gabriel?'

'Yeah, Beautiful?'

I lift my hand and show him Rebecca Hooper's ring, which still sits on my finger. 'When I first touched the ring, I had magic. Not my own, but I definitely had access to magic.' I explain it all. What it felt like. How it left me when the spell was done. 'And also, when I touched the stone, and all that power crashed into me, I was filled with knowledge.'

'Knowledge?' he asks.

'Yeah. Rebecca told me that she had given me all her knowledge about magic and spells.'

He sits up and looks at me with a raised brow. 'You know all her spells?'

'I did. I knew everything. Thousands of ways to use my power. But then, when the spell ended and Grayson cut me off, and the magic from her ring faded, it all disappeared. For a moment, I had so much power. So much wisdom. Then it left me. On top of everything else, I feel powerless and overwhelmed with grief that it's gone, and I have no idea if it will ever come back.'

'Perhaps, when you get your magic back, the knowledge will return.' His words sound optimistic, but only a fool should ever be optimistic.

'I'll never get my Bloodstone back from Grayson.' And then it hits me. I sit up. 'Maybe I don't need to! If Rebecca's ring had magic, her necklace might have it too! I could use it to attack Grayson and steal back my Bloodstone, and then, on the Blood-moon, I could do the second stone.' I'm up on my feet, filled with a flicker of hope. Even in this excessive pit of misery and pain, a flicker is enough to help me see some hope. 'I could have my magic back! We could finish the spell

and leave this shit-hole behind for good!’

‘But we have no idea where the necklace is,’ he says, joining me on his feet.

‘The next Blood-moon is a little over four months away. That doesn’t give us much time.’ I’m pacing back and forth, my thoughts raging. ‘Connor will be able to track it down, and if we dig in my head for the lost memories-’

‘Lilly... don’t you think you’ve learnt enough about your past? Maybe we should just leave it be.’

‘If I don’t find the necklace before the Blood-moon, the first stone will seal and we will never reach the Arcane realm. The Hunters plague will spread, their hatred contaminating every human on earth and it won’t stop until we are all dead! I think that trumps my emotional trauma’s. Besides, I’m fine.’ I snatch up my boots left abandoned by the end of the bed and start sliding them on my feet.

‘You are not fine.’

‘I am perfectly-’

‘Your mum tried to kill you!’ he snaps. ‘You dad is Jensen Hartley!’ I continue tying my laces, albeit, a little slower. ‘For God’s sake, Lilly. You are one more nasty revelation away from Breaking and I won’t stand by and watch you disappear, only to be taken over by a monster that will rival Toby’s sadistic cruelty.’

I slam my foot down on the floor and stand.

‘I will not Break, Gabriel. I am stronger than that. As long as I have you... as long as I have Amara, and Collins, and Connor.... As long as I have hope... I will never give up. Got it?’

I wait. He opens his mouth to argue but thinks better of it. He nods instead.

‘Good. Then let’s get going. Before Grayson catches up with the delay.’

We drive through the night. Trees whizz past the window. Fields and farms turn to villages. Villages into towns. Banners hang high from the buildings declaring that the people who live here stand against magic. That they condemn witches. That they will burn the heathens. Nooses hang from lampposts with effigies wearing black pointy hats. Windows of herbal shops and spiritual healing practitioners are broken or boarded up. Front doors have graffiti claiming the Devil's whore lives here. There are burnt out cars. Looted buildings. And some houses have been burnt to the ground. And there are multiple blood stains on the pavement. We notice groups that appear to be on the prowl. They wear plain white porcelain masks on their faces. Dozens of them. All wandering around with weapons such as bats and hammers. The streets are otherwise eerily silent as we look out through the tinted windows with growing anxiety.

'What's with the creepy masks?' I ask.

'The masks are what Hunters wear at witch executions,' Gabriel tells me. 'These people are vigilantes. Probably all under the effect of the Hunter's mark.'

'Fucking hell,' I swallow the fear with a dry mouth and lock my door. Images of the gang at the little museum flood my mind and I worry for all the innocent bystanders that have been, or will be, hurt by these people. They occasionally glance at our beat-up people carrier, but pay no mind as we travel casually through their hometowns.

Gabriel and I are up front. He keeps hold of my hand as he drives and I see Jensen in the rearview mirror, watching us. They keep a firm grasp on timing and distance, making sure we stay ahead of the Bloodstone delay, but already we know that this can't carry on.

For two days, we weave around the UK, never stopping in one place for too long and sticking to country roads when we can. It's on the third day that my Sensativa returns. I never realised how much I loved feeling Gabriel's magic until I was forced to be without it. We assume that the spell zapped my magical strength, that's what Connor called it, and that it will take the same amount of time for it to return after the next stone. Rebecca was right. I will certainly need protection afterwards.

As we travel, the radio is always playing and we listen to nothing but the news.

Riots. Mobs. Gangs. Murder and missing persons fill the airwaves.

There are more every day. Shops start selling the porcelain masks for five pounds each, or free with a full tank of petrol.

Pamphlets are handed out with titles like: Seven ways to spot an occultist. How magic can destroy our planet. Why witches want to kill your children.

Meanwhile, politicians are assuring the country that they are safe and under the protection of Witch Hunters. They encourage them to inform the authorities of any person they have concerns over. The prime minister boasts that thousands of Hunters are flooding into the country from all over the world to help the people and he makes a half-assed attempt at deterring the vigilante's efforts. And that damned public service announcement continues to play on the television.

As each day passes, and more Hunters arrive on British soil, the hostility and violence gets worse. England is at war with itself and as far as we can tell, the only people who have been hurt are humans. No camps have been found, but we all wait for that one story which will tell us that some Descendants have been discovered.

I feel like my heart will wear out if it keeps beating like this.

A week passes and by some miracle we haven't been caught by Grayson or the Hunters. Despite their obvious increase in numbers, we haven't come across any. Gabriel and I have spent hours and hours trying to search my mind for any clue of where the necklace may be, but all we've found is blackness. The hole where my memories should be, remains a bottomless pit of nothingness. The same as it has been for the last two years.

When night falls and a heavy rain starts, we pull into a holiday park and pay for a caravan so we can get some rest. Side by side, on a tiny bed, Gabriel and I talk.

'My nightmares have stopped.'

'That's a good thing, right?' he asks, running his fingers through my hair.

'Since the spell, I've not had a single dream at all. That's weird, right?'

'What about the little voice? Have you been hearing that? Or seeing any hallucinations?'

I shake my head.

'Well,' he yawns. 'I'll take that as a win.'

There's a rap on the door.

'We need to move, folks.'

'Okay, Jensen. We'll be out in a minute,' Gabriel calls back, sitting himself up and bringing me with him.

'How's she doing?' Jensen enquires. 'Did she get any sleep? I'd ask her myself but-'

‘Fine. She’s doing fine.’ Gabriel lowers his voice as he addresses me. ‘You have to talk to him at some point. Being stuck in that car with you two is beyond awkward.’

‘Not ready yet. I’ll talk to him when the urge to slit his throat passes.’

‘I did offer to kill him for you.’

‘You know I can hear you, right? This caravan’s walls are thinner than paper.’

‘It was a joke, Jensen,’ Gabriel replies, shaking his head and mouthing “Not a joke. I will kill him”. He gets to his feet and claps his hands together. ‘Right. We need to get going. You good?’

I join him as he heads to the door. ‘Where are we going?’

‘East.’

‘What’s East?’

‘Maybe nothing. Connor’s found something about a private auction. One of the items listed sounds similar to the necklace.’

I reach my arms up high, stretching out the hours of car travel from my muscles. ‘Okay. But on the way there, I want to look into my memories again.’

‘Sure,’ he sighs, holding the door open for me. ‘But without your magic I can’t search as deep as I would like.’

I pass Jensen as we walk through the narrow caravan hallway. He takes my arm.

‘When will you talk to me? It’s been over a week and we have a lot to sort out.’

Snatching my arm away, I tell him, ‘I need to sort my own head out before I can try and sort yours out too.’

‘I didn’t know what your mum was doing. Please... you must-’

Gabriel nudges me out the way. ‘It’s the fact you let her get cut, Jensen. Just let her deal in her own time, yeah?’ He leads me along the thin corridor to the others who are all cramped into the kitchen/lounge area. Connor has his nose stuck in a book. He’s been in full-research mode, trying hard to find any clues as to the necklace’s location. Collins is helping Amara put on her jacket and Jensen lingers in the door way. Everyone looks remarkably happy, despite being exhausted. But I suppose freedom is freedom. Even if we have to keep moving to keep it. Collins is next to drive. Gabriel and I take up the very back seats and continue trying to prize my memories from my skull.

Hours pass, and nothing.

As we travel, I see a group of jobs five strong, running around a corner up ahead. They’re whooping and cheering as they go. As we carry on and pass the side road they went down, I see why. They’re chasing someone. A girl. The road they’ve chased her down isn’t a

road at all but an alleyway with no exit. The idiots are wearing those masks.

‘Collins, did you see?’

He’s already slammed on the brakes. ‘Yeah. I saw.’ He puts his gears into reverse and we shoot backwards, stopping at the top of the alley. The men have cornered the girl. She’s picked up a pipe in an effort to defend herself. But she’s outnumbered and they quickly take away her weapon. They grab her, calling her a witch. But killing her is not on their agenda. Not yet at any rate. They start working as a cruel team to tear off her clothes. ‘Girls, stay in the car,’ Collins says.

Gabriel unclicks his seat belt and leaps out of the car.

‘Right behind you,’ Jensen adds, leaving the car with them. All three men walk down the alleyway. They yell and get the attention of the attackers. Collins rolls up his sleeves, ready to fight. Gabriel has a knife in his hand. But Jensen simply stops, pulls out a gun, and with five shots, the men go down one after the other.

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop.

Dead.

Gabriel and Collins turn to face Jensen with open mouths. Jensen simply holsters his weapon, shrugs, and returns back to the car. He gets in and waits patiently for the other two to return.

‘Jensen...’ Amara gasps in awe. ‘That was bad-ass!’

‘It’s all men like that deserve. World’s better off without them.’ He reloads his gun before tucking it back inside his jacket. The other two return to the car and turn in their seats to look at Jensen.

‘You’re a good shot.’

‘Well, some of us don’t have magic to fall back on. If we had more time, I’d have castrated ’em first. Lass alright?’

‘She ran off screaming before we could check. I think she’s in one piece.’ Collins drives on and starts heading down a country bypass. ‘I can’t believe we didn’t see that all this was the effect of the Hunter’s mark. This hatred and malice is insanity. It was a good job we were passing. Poor girl.’

‘I’m surprised you stopped, if I’m honest,’ Jensen adds quietly after a few minutes.

‘What? You thought we’d just drive away from someone about to be gang raped in a filthy alley?’ Gabriel scoffs.

‘Rape ain’t above your brother. You lot thought nothing of forcing Rose Hooper into having kids against her will. We all know how obsessed he is with the Hooper bloodline. I’m just relieved I got Lilly out before she fell victim to that kind of savagery.’

‘Bit late for that.’ I didn’t even realise I’d said it. The words came out without thought. Jensen spins quickly in his seat and watches me. His thoughts rage behind his eyes and then everything seems to fall

into place for him. He pulls out his gun and aims it at the back of Gabriel's head. Connor grabs his hand just as he fires. The bullet misses Gabriel's head by a millimetre and shatters the windscreen as he roars a swear word. Jensen keeps trying to fire as Connor attempts to get the gun off him. I leap over the seats and attack my long-lost father like a rabid dog. I shout and scream and bite and scratch, all the while, the car swerves and everyone yells. Amara tries to get me off. Gabriel ducks to avoid the bullets and Collins does his best to get the car off the road in one piece. When he slams on the brakes, we all fly forward and fall into the foot well. I have Jensen beneath me and I'm going crazy. Fists. Nails. Anything and everything is my weapon. Connor grabs the gun and scarpers out of the car so no one else can get it. Gabriel appears at the open door and hauls me off Jensen. Collins grabs Jensen in a choke hold and yanks him out too. We're in a car park behind a derelict country pub, so luckily, we're out of sight. Which is a good thing because this is madness! Jensen is thrown against the car and Collins holds him in place with an arm across his chest. Gabriel has dragged me away from them and is trying to keep hold of me as I swear and thrash against him in a bid to hurt my father.

'What the fuck, Jensen?!' Gabriel bellows over me as he keeps me pinned to his chest. 'What the hell did you just try and shoot me for?'

'Get the hell of me!' Jensen barks at Collins who barely struggles against his attempts to get free.

'Lilly... Will you fucking stop before you hurt yourself?' Gabriel snaps at me.

'He just tried to kill you!'

'Yeah. I got that when his bullet grazed my fucking ear!'

'Why the hell did you just try and kill my fiancé?' I scream furiously.

'I kill him, I'll kill Grayson! That bastard raped my daughter!'

'What?'

'What?'

'What?'

Collins, Gabriel and Amara all ask at the same time with confusion before they all look at me as if it's true.

'What the hell are you talking about?!' I hiss.

'You just said!' He stops trying to get away from Collins. He sees there's no point. The man's as strong as an ox. He looks directly at me with anguish. 'You said Grayson raped you.'

'I didn't say Grayson raped me! You're fucking unhinged! How dare you! You try to murder Gabriel right in front of me? Even if Grayson had raped me – which he hasn't – you, killing the man I love is hardly helping, is it?!'

‘I won’t stand by and let the man who assaulted my daughter live.’ His face is red and he shakes with anger.

‘I just said Grayson never-’

“A bit late for that!” You said. If you didn’t mean that, then what the hell did you mean?”

‘You think you can swoop in and save me? Be my dad? Protect me by killing the man I love? You’re deluded, Jensen. DELUDED! Get off me!’ I shrug off Gabriel and walk away a few steps in a bid to calm down. Gabriel remains between us and watches me closely, but when I turn, I just look at Jensen. ‘You are not my dad, Jensen. So stop trying to be. You’re a sperm donor. A child abandoning bastard and a sadistic prick that watched his flesh and blood get mutilated by your friend.’

‘Yeah. I am those things. I stopped looking when I thought you were dead and I shouldn’t have. I let Theo do what he did and I regret it every single day. But I will not let you be subjected to the same fate as your ancestor. I haven’t been able to protect you from much. But I can protect you from that. No man will ever violate you-’

‘Well you should have come and got me from Harry’s house when I was fourteen years old then!’ I yell. My eyes well up and tears quickly slide down my cheeks as everyone goes dead silent. ‘You want to protect me from being violated? Well you can’t. You’re too late. You’re years too late. I had my virginity taken from me on the floor of my attic-bedroom. I didn’t even know what sex was! No one told me!’ My words echo around us and they make Jensen’s face pale. I turn to Gabriel. ‘I told you to tell him everything. I told you-’

‘I didn’t think you meant that,’ he apologises.

‘Who?’ Jensen asks quietly. ‘Who was it?’

‘Some lad Harry hired to work at the house,’ Gabriel tells him on my behalf, a lot gentler than I expected and a lot calmer than I am currently capable of. ‘Don’t drag it all up now, Jensen. She’s vulnerable enough as it is.’

‘I want to know who. I want his name,’ Jensen snarls. ‘I WANT HIS HEAD!’

‘Yet again, Jensen, you’re too fucking late. He’s dead, okay? Junior’s dead and he died bloody. So try and find another way to act like a dad-’

‘What?’ Gabriel grabs my arm and spins me round to face him. ‘What did you just say?’

‘I said Ryan’s dead. That-’

He shakes his head. ‘You said “Junior”. “Junior’s dead”. His eyes search mine and a disgusted look etches across his face. ‘Hold on...’

‘I... I didn’t say Junior.’ I pull back my arm, shaking my head adamantly. ‘I said Ryan. I said Ryan’s dead.’

‘You said Junior,’ Amara agrees, the same look of anguish on her face.

‘Who is Ryan? Who is Junior?’ Jensen demands, looking between us all.

Gabriel takes a step closer to me. ‘Lilly...’ he says painfully. ‘Was the person who raped you, your cousin?’ I just stare at him, not knowing what to say. ‘But, I’ve been looking for him for months. Why wouldn’t you tell me? Harry... he said he went to France. I don’t understand.’

The lump in my throat increases in size. He takes a few steps closer.

‘Tell me... For fuck sake, Lilly. Just tell me the truth!’

‘I can’t,’ I whisper, taking a step back. ‘Please...’

He rushes forwards, eliminating any space between us, and holds my shoulders. His eyes dance back and forth as he looks deep into my eyes. ‘Lilly, is Ryan... Junior? Was the person who assaulted you... your cousin?’

‘His name was Ryan-’

‘Lilly... please!’

‘Ryan,’ I whisper. ‘Harry. Ryan. Junior. He was Harry’s son.’

I walk past Gabriel and return to the car after he stood there in silence for far too long, just staring at me. I never ever wanted the truth about who Ryan really was to get out. It's disgusting and vile and probably more than Gabriel can handle. I climb into the back seat of the car, alone, and think that perhaps this will be the straw that breaks the camel's back. There's only so much a person can live with. His future wife was in a relationship with his brother. Was pregnant with his baby. Is smothered in scars. Has made him lose his family and his home. And now he learns that she was abused by her own cousin.

Amara's the first to return to the car. She sits beside me and takes my hand in hers.

'I love you, Honey.'

'I don't see why.' I pull my hand away and tuck my knees up so I can bury my head in them. The rest of the doors open and close as they return to the car, and we drive off.

No one says a word.



An hour passes. The car is unbearably silent as I sit with my head resting against the cold glass. I ache inside as no one speaks. I twist the brilliant blue sapphire diamond sitting on my finger again and again, hating that I'm wearing it. I should have told Gabriel the truth about Ryan sooner. Now, he probably feels obligated to carry on with our relationship because he's a good man and would never want to hurt me by calling off the wedding. He's gone to such lengths to be with me. He's lost his brother. His home. His coven. His life is in danger now, more than ever, all because he wanted to be with me. And now he knows the most sordid details of an already sordid part of my life. I slide the ring off my finger as tears prick my eyes. I'll end it, let him off the hook. It's the least I can do for him after everything that I've already put him through. I kiss the ring and clasp it tightly in my palm.

I lift my eyes and see him watching me intently through the rear-view mirror. He saw me take it off and he starts shaking his head.

'No. No-no-no.' Gabriel unclips his seat belt. 'That is *not* fucking happening. No!'

'Mate... She needs some space.' Collins says, attempting to calm him down.

‘I’ve given her enough space as I’m willing to. She’s taken off her engagement ring.’

‘She what?’

‘She doesn’t need space. She needs me.’

Gabriel turns on the radio, dialing up the volume so the speakers rattle. He clambers between the two front seats and makes his way towards me. He’s all limbs as he squeezes between the chairs and apologies as his arse ends up in Collins’s face. Connor and Jensen move aside to make room for him to get through the second row of seats.

‘Move over, sweetheart,’ he says to Amara, who’s already started climbing over the seats to give him her seat. They get a little tangled as they maneuver past each other and Jensen narrowly misses Gabriel’s boot from whacking into his nose. Amara lands with a squeak on Connor’s lap, her feet on the roof and her head in the foot well. Gabriel crashes into the seat next to me and pulls off his jacket. He gets as close to me as he can before throwing his coat over both our heads and guiding my face to his in the darkness. The radio still blares. Our voices and faces are hidden from everyone else. This is as much privacy as we can get in this car.

‘Now, you listen to me,’ he says sternly. ‘And you listen fucking hard. I love you. You hear that? I. Fucking. Love. You. How many times must I say it before it sticks? When will you believe me?’ He takes my hand which still holds his ring and gives it a gentle squeeze. ‘What happened to you when you were a child was not your fault. It was something beyond your control.’

‘It’s disgusting. It’s unnatural-’

‘Yeah. It was. Because sexual abuse *is* disgusting,’ he says firmly. ‘Rape is unnatural. You, my love... are not.’

‘He was my cousin,’ I whisper shamefully.

‘He was a piece of shit. He was a monster. And now he’s gone. Hey...’ He lifts my face and the brightness of his eyes bore into mine. But I struggle to hold his gaze and keep glancing away. ‘I would never hold anything that happened to you, against you. I would never think less of you. I would never blame you. And frankly, I’m hurt that you think that I would.’

‘You didn’t talk to me. When you found out, you just stared at me.’

‘It was a bit of a shock, Lilly. It took me by surprise, that’s all. By the time I’d got it straight in my head, which was like... thirty seconds by the way, you had charged off into the car. They all told me I should give you some space to let you calm down. I promise you that I am never taking their advice again. It was not because I didn’t love you anymore.’ His lips kiss my knuckles. ‘Why did you take the ring I gave you off? You don’t want to marry me?’

‘Why would you even want to marry me? For God’s sake-’

He takes hold of my chin and refuses to let go. When I give in and look into his eyes, he tells me, ‘You are worth everything and so much more. Every morning, I look at you and I think... I will never love you more than I do right now. And then you do or say something that just dazzles me, and my heart grows purely so it can love you more. You are the bravest, kindest, and most resilient woman I have ever met. If I were you, I would be drunk on the floor every single fucking day rather than face half the shit you’ve been through. The fact that you get the strength not only to live, but to love and to fight, it’s the most amazing and incredible thing I have ever witnessed. I will always love you. No matter what you’ve been through. What you do. Where you go. What path you choose to take. I will be right by your side, loving you more and more every single fucking day. I’m pissed you didn’t tell me, Lilly. I’m pissed that you were willing to risk your safety under Grayson’s captivity knowing that my plan to replace you with Junior was never going to happen. I’m pissed that you didn’t trust me enough to confide in me. But you want to know what really pisses me off?’ He prizes open my hand. His ring sits in my palm. ‘I’m pissed that you thought I wouldn’t love you anymore because the man that hurt you against your will was related to you. You don’t love me anymore and you want to end this? Fine. Take the ring. Sell it. Use the money to help you on your way to whatever it is that you want to do. I mean, I’ll probably follow you like a weird stalker. But if that’s what you want, then I’ll accept it. Kind of. But if you’re doing this because you think for a second that this is what *I* want, then you are absofuckinglutely wrong. Me and you, Beautiful. Against the crazy voice in your head. Against psycho-exes and obsessed brothers. Mad father in-laws that just tried to shoot me and sadistic Hunters that want to eradicate us. Me and you against the whole fucking world.’

‘Against the world,’ I grin, with happy tears marking my cheeks. His words are perfect. He’s perfect. My perfect.

‘The sky is pink. Absofuckinglutely pink. Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’ I nod.

‘Can I put your engagement ring back on your finger?’

With a grin, I nod. ‘Yes, please.’ He replaces the ring and I swell with affection. ‘I absofuckinglutely love you, Gabriel.’

‘I love you more, future wife.’

‘Impossible, future husband.’ I lean in to kiss him but he retreats. ‘What?’

‘Marry me.’

‘I will. I will.’

‘No. Marry me now. Let’s get married today. What do you say?’

Gabriel pulls off the coat from our heads and declares loudly to the car, that today, we're getting married! The whole car explodes with applause and cheers. Even Jensen nods his approval. He heard what Gabriel said to me and apologises for misjudging him.

The car stops twice and Amara and Connor leave to fetch something from each place before we carry on driving. Two things that they wouldn't share with me. We finally reach our destination. We drive along a gravel driveway that takes us to a pink cottage nestled into the cliffs. Ivy covers half the fascia and the paint is weathered and peeling. The sun is starting to set and the breeze on my skin when I leave the car is gentle and refreshing. After Collins, Gabriel and Jensen check the house, we all head inside. It's been empty for a while, I can tell. It's dusty and the air is stagnant, but the place itself is very cute. The ground floor is spacious and bright, with white stonewashed walls and rustic flag stone floors. To the left is the period staircase, rising to the first floor. Beyond that is a generous dining room and character, country style kitchen with a traditional Aga in the corner. Gabriel leads me past it all to the back of the house, where a conservatory looks across the ocean. Directly below is a stunning beach. I can see the sea disappearing into the horizon with the sun sinking below its glassy surface.

'This is beautiful,' I sigh happily, sinking into his chest. 'This cottage is perfect. I wish we could stay longer than a few hours.'

'There's a pathway carved into these cliffs which takes you right down to the beach. It's half a mile of nothing but sand from here to the water. That's where we're going to have the ceremony. Down there on the beach.'

'That sounds perfect. I could spend the rest of my life, with your arms around me, looking out at this view.'

'When all this is over, when we're in the Arcane realm, we'll travel to this exact spot and build our very own version. We'll wake up every morning to this view. What do you say?'

'I say I can't wait,' I reply with a beaming grin.

'You two are so soppy,' Collins jests as he joins us in the living room, dropping the bags he's carried in onto the floor with a thump. Jensen is behind him and drops yet more travel bags.

'You know, it's customary to ask for permission before you marry a man's daughter.'

'And I hear that it is customary not to try and shoot the groom in

the head just before the wedding.' I retort with a raised brow.

'True,' he shrugs. Slowly he heads towards us, shoulders back and jaw tight. Gabriel slides me behind him and meets him standing tall. 'I've seen a lot of cruelty and malice from your family. I have to be honest, I'm not convinced you two getting married is in her best interest.'

'All I have is her best interests. It's everyone else's that I don't give too much concern over.'

Jensen looks past Gabriel's protective stance to me. 'I know he'll do whatever he can to make sure you're safe, which, if you do Break, probably won't stand the rest of us in good stead.'

'I won't turn dark. I have the Break under control.'

'I hope so.' He sighs heavily and slides his hands into his pockets. 'Lilly, I'm not a particularly good man. But I always gave you everything I could. I loved you and your mum more than I had ever loved anyone. I still love you. More than anything. And I know Gabriel does too. I know it probably means less than nothing to you, but I do give you both my blessing. And I want you to know that I will help you do the spell to send Descendants to the Arcane Realm. I'll do whatever you need me to do.' His feet move him closer and a desperation seeps into his emerald eyes. 'I will never be able to live with the knowledge that you suffered so much at the hands of others while I lived in ignorance of your pain. I will never forgive myself for believing Theo's lies. I will never ask for your forgiveness, because there is nothing I could ever do to undo what my actions caused.' He takes another step closer and Gabriel shifts to the side. I meet Jensen halfway and let him take my hand. 'I was once, a good father. You are still a most beloved daughter. My hope is that one day, you will allow me to be a good father to you again. And until then, I will be here, in the background, doing anything you need me to do. Helping in any way I can. And loving you.' His palm rests softly on my cheek and I find myself leaning into his touch. 'I love you, Buttons. And I am sorry for failing to protect you. I am sorry for hurting you. I am sorry.'

My arms furl around his neck and his around my waist. Our embrace is firm and way overdue. His tears land on my shoulder and I realise I have a content smile on my face.

With a sniff and a cough to clear his throat, Jensen steps back and swiftly wipes his tears.

'I'll leave you and your friends to celebrate.'

'You're not coming to the ceremony?' Gabriel asks, taking my hand in his.

'I don't want to get in the way.'

'You won't,' I tell him. 'As long as you don't try and shoot Gabriel in the back of his head again. We need to start over, Jensen. Move on

and all that. Amara said it's customary for the father to walk the bride down the aisle. Do you... do you want to?'

His mouth opens and he reminds me a little of a fish.

'Jensen? You don't have to-'

'No, of course I want to!' he replies, blinking in surprise. 'I mean, if you're sure, I would love to! I would really love to!'

'Great,' Gabriel says happily, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. 'Then let's get this show on the road.'



Upstairs, in a cosy master bedroom with a rickety four poster bed and two double windows that look out to the ocean, I sit and let Amara work on my hair. She lets it hang loose down my back and works in intricate little braids along the sides. She has a small pile of daisies resting on the dressing table and she delicately tucks them into the braids. She then pulls out a large bag. Inside is a dress.

My wedding dress.

Amara's almost dancing on the spot before I let her put it on me. After some gasps and *ohh*'s and *erm*'s, she's happy with my appearance and orders me to close my eyes.

A few steps to the left and I'm told, 'Open your eyes.'

'Wow,' I whisper, looking at myself in the full-length mirror. 'I look...'

'Beautiful,' Amara grins.

I give a little twirl. It's a stunning but simple white dress. The three-quarter length sleeves are made of delicate lace. It has a V-neckline and the lace continues from the sleeves over the bodice. The floor-length skirt is layered chiffon that trails ever so slightly behind me and for a charity shop purchase it is an amazing fit. Yes, there's a little tear on the hip and a bit of wear along the hem. But it's perfect. Amara couldn't find any shoes my size, so barefoot it is.

'How on earth did you manage to pull this off?'

'I have the advantage of a beautiful canvas.' She beams while gripping my hand. 'I can't believe you're getting married. I can't believe it's to Gabriel! I can't believe he's actually settling down! Oh! Which brings me to the second bag.' She rushes to the bed and pulls out a small black paper bag with silver ribbon acting as handles. 'I thought that perhaps you would like to give him this.'

I take it and pull out a black box. When I open the box, I am utterly speechless.

'This is incredible!' I pull out a ring. It's a black gold wedding band with an emerald green square stone.

'It's a wedding gift. From the boys and me. I have no idea if it will

fit him, and the carat is... well it's non-existent, but it's better than no ring at all, huh?'

'It's perfect! Completely perfect! It's exactly the sort of ring Gabriel would wear.' I hold it up and examine it more closely. The shade of green is a little lighter than what my eyes are, but the idea of us both wearing rings that match the other's eye colour is a brilliant way of honouring his mother and his heritage. The fact that it's from the people I love the most makes it even more special.

'I'm getting married... Amara...' I lift my head as it hits me. 'I'm getting married today!' My chest gets tight and I become a little breathless.

'Oh my. Okay, sit down.' I'm eased onto the bed as she starts fanning me with the bag the ring came in. 'Don't freak out.'

'Freak out?' I burst into a fit of laughter. 'I'm so fucking excited I could pee!'

'Well... don't do that. No one wants to marry someone who smells of wee.' We both burst into a fit of giggles before sharing a hug. 'I love you, Honey.'

'I love you too. So, what are you wearing?'

'Me?'

'Yeah. My maid of honor has to wear something other than baggy jeans and a hoody.'

Her eyes tear up and her lip trembles.

'You want me to be your maid of honour?'

'Who else?'

With a squeal, she rushes to the bag she pulled my dress from and produces a pale-pink, knee-length dress made of lace.

'I got it just in case.'

'Then let's get you ready too.'

Half an hour later, and we're ready. The last daisies are delicately placed in my hair and Gabriel's ring is tight in hand.

'Before we go out there...' I take her hands in mine and we face each other. 'I want you to have this.' I slide off Rebecca Hooper's wedding ring, and place it gently on her finger.

'Lilly... I can't take this!'

'I want you to. It's a family heirloom after all. I won't be having a child. And you are my sister. You should have it, and you should hand it down to your children. And so on.'

She lifts her finger and marvels at it. The stone is clear now, and no magic remains within it. All that remains is its sentimental value, and sentimentally... it belongs to her. To my family.

Someone knocks at the door just as she opens her mouth to say something.

I head over and open the door.

‘Woah.’ Connor looks us both up and down, breathing out a long, admiring breath. ‘If I wasn’t into guys, I would be hitting on you two so hard right now.’

‘Even in my wedding dress?’

‘Especially in that dress. Lilly, you look stunning.’ He plants a kiss on my cheek and does the same with Amara. Down the hall, Jensen watches us. He doesn’t know where to put himself.

I head towards him. ‘How do I look?’

‘Gorgeous. And happy.’

‘I am happy.’

‘The fellas are just setting up down on the beach. They need another half an hour or so.’

‘That’s fine. I could really do with some air and a minute or two to just gather my thoughts.’

‘Of course. Just don’t go too far and stay close.’

‘Will do.’ I head down the stairs.



The sound of the waves lapping at the shore and the gulls flying overhead are incredibly relaxing. The breeze cools my flushed skin and the sunset is truly spectacular. My gown whips around my legs as I walk towards the cliffs. I can’t believe that this is actually happening. It’s more than I ever thought I would have in my life. A man who truly loves me. A best friend. Two amazing friends and even a father! Jensen and I have a hell of a long way to go, but it’s a start I suppose. As I slowly wander around the side of the cottage, I sense Gabriel and Collins close by. Amara told me it’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding, but she didn’t say anything about the bride seeing the groom. I sneak closer to the cliffs and find the steps that Gabriel mentioned. They’ve been carved into the cliff-face and lead all the way down to the beach. I follow them down, holding the hem of my dress up by my knees so I don’t trip. Down and down I go, until my feet touch sand. The cool grains nestle between my toes as I wiggle them. I look once more out to the water and find the whole scene both serene and enchanting. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life on this beach over in the Arcane realm with Gabriel.

My husband.

His voice carries on the wind. I scoop up the hem of my gown and slowly make my way closer to him. There’s a group of large boulders and I hear both Gabriel and Collins talking on the other side. Quietly, I peek through a gap between two rocks and see them standing together. Candles are buried into the sand creating an aisle, and Gabriel and Collins are standing where the alter would be. He’s

wearing a loose white shirt and a pair of black jeans. His hair's just as untamed as it usually is and a silver tie hangs loosely around his neck. I smirk and bite my lip as he tries to tie it. I doubt he's ever worn a tie before.

'God, it's like watching a monkey trying to knit,' Collins laughs, heading over to help him. 'Do you not own a hair brush? You're getting married for goodness sake.'

'Lilly likes my hair like this,' Gabriel grins. 'She says it's sexy.'

'Is that so?'

'Yep.'

'Suppose she also loves the fact that you can't iron a shirt for shit?' He gestures to the creases on his arms.

'She sure does,' he chuckles.

Collins continues to straighten his tie and when he's done, he steps back to admire his handy work. 'I can't believe you are getting married. You! Of all people. Mr "I'm never settling down".'

'Old Gabriel is dead and gone, mate. This is the new and improved Gabriel and he is here to stay. I got my best buddy, the girl of my dreams-'

'And a father-in-law that tried to kill you a few hours ago.'

'Precisely. What else is there to have?' Gabriel whacks Collins playfully on the arm. 'It's taken five-hundred years but I am *finally* happy. I mean, the timings awful and we have the world against us but other than that, I couldn't be happier.'

But Collins's eyes narrow a little and his smile lessens. 'Bit of a shock today though? How are you feeling about the whole... Ryan thing?'

Gabriel's eyes go dark and hatred etches over his former joy. 'How am I supposed to feel about it?'

'I don't know. That's why I'm asking. She's been through so much, man. Too much. She's got you and Amara to keep her together. But what about you? I know that if it was Amara that had been through half of what Lilly's been through I think I'd go insane with anger.'

'Don't get me wrong, every time I think about what's happened to her I feel a murderous rage building inside me that I worry will consume me whole. But then, who do I direct it at? Her uncle Harry and aunt Christa are dead. The house staff and that vile thing that hurt her are long gone. I could waste my time being angry. Turn my wrath out into the world. Spend my days plotting Grayson, Theo and Toby's destruction. Or I could just channel it into making Lilly happy and safe. I channel all that rage into loving her. And fuck... I really love her. I never thought I could or would love someone like this, but I do.' Gabriel slides his hands into his pockets and looks out to the sea. His eyes scan its endless beauty as his shoulders slump. 'But if I'm

honest, when I'm not completely besotted and in awe of her, I'm just terrified of losing her.'

'You scared she's going to Break again?'

'So scared. And not just of that. It's getting close to the time where I admit to her the truth about June. I can't put it off for much longer. The Blood-moon is in four months and I've dug myself such a hole I have no idea how to get out of it without losing everything.'

I feel a swell of dread rise in my chest.

What does he mean? What lie? Who the hell is June?

'How can I tell her about June without destroying all the trust I've worked so hard to put in place? She finally trusts me and that's after all my fuck ups. When she hears the truth-'

'You don't tell her!' Collins says firmly. 'You tell her the truth about June, you have no idea how she'll react. That Break of hers is getting stronger and bigger. She snaps and we're all screwed. You cannot tell her about June!'

'Maybe. Maybe not. She's forgiven me before for lying to her. Maybe if I just tell her the truth before she finds out on her own, she'll be inclined to forgive me again.' Gabriel looks to Collins with uncertainty. Collins returns his look in equal measure. 'You don't think she'll forgive me?'

'I think she might. After all, what happened back in June wasn't your fault but are you sure you want to risk it? You don't have to tell her the whole truth. We can figure out a way to give it back to her without her knowing you had it all along.'

June the month, not a person then. That's a relief. But then, what happened in June? I was at Harry's back in June and it's April now. What the hell is he talking about? What does he have of mine that he needs to give back?

'No. It wasn't my fault, but it was on me to tell her the truth about it. I feel like I've tricked her into falling in love with me sometimes.'

'She loves you because she loves you. You didn't trick her into that. No one can trick someone into loving them.'

'Toby did. He manipulated the shit out of her. You know, she only had sex with him the first time because he said he wouldn't come back to see her if she didn't let him?'

I hate that he's sharing that private information with Collins, but my desperation to hear the rest of this conversation is far stronger, so I remain hidden and listen. A hand rests on my shoulder. I spin so fast I almost fall. Amara gasps in surprise at my reaction and is about to ask what I'm doing before I press my finger to her lips and point to the boys on the other side of the rock.

'Are we spying?' she whispers excitedly.

'Shh. Listen.'

‘Toby’s a sick bastard. You would never do that to her. To anyone,’ Collins says firmly. ‘You have your flaws like the rest of us. But you are not the same as your brothers or your father. You are a good person and you did not trick Lilly into loving you.’

‘When she first touched me at the house and she didn’t feel any pain, I think that was such a big moment for us. For her.’

‘She didn’t feel pain because she knew she could trust you. Deep down, somewhere past all that misery and fear, she knew she could trust you. And she can. Everything you’ve done has been to protect her. Sometimes, safety is more important than happiness. But right now, I seriously think that her happiness is more important than anything else.’

‘I can’t just appear with her necklace without telling her how I found it,’ Gabriel says quietly. But not quietly enough. Now my heart rate starts to pick up. ‘She keeps making me look into her mind. To help her figure out what happened in those missing six-weeks, and every time I tell her I can’t see anything it’s just another lie. Another thing that she’ll need to forgive me for. If I hadn’t left that day-’

‘You didn’t know what was going to happen, Gabriel. You didn’t know Toby was going to take her and you didn’t know that he would do what he did to her and that baby.’

‘What is he talking about?’ Amara whispers in my ear. I shrug and shake my head, still straining my ears to hear their private words.

‘When she woke up back at the house after Grayson brought her home and it was clear she had no memory of you, you made the right call,’ Collins continues. ‘Those six-weeks needed to remain lost. It was clear that whatever happened to her then caused that Break, and risking her Breaking again is far too dangerous. Especially now. You say she has all of Rebecca Hooper’s knowledge and power dormant inside her? If she gets her magic and she Breaks, there will be no stopping her. If she learns the truth, that you and she knew each other before Toby took her to that barn, she could really freak out. She could Break.’

‘What?!’ Amara hisses.

My whole world shifts on its side. All the air leaves my lungs and I have to hold the rock to stop myself from falling to my knees. His words don’t make sense. I don’t understand.

‘Maybe.’ Gabriel drags his hand through his hair and groans loudly. ‘There is so much at stake. If the spell isn’t completed, the Hunters mark will spread its hate and malice to everyone it comes close to. Humanity will destroy us as well as itself. And if the necklace does give Lilly access to magic, it’s more important than ever that I get it to her. With everything going on, she needs to be able to protect herself. I mean, there’s Toby who has a band of witch extremists at his beck

and call. Grayson who wants to breed an army of Arcane Witches to help him take control of the covens all across the world and Theo who wants to use Lilly to kill every single Descendant in the world all in the name of bringing his dead mistress back to life. I won't risk losing her. I won't, Collins. She might never forgive me or it might be the thing that tips her over the edge.'

'So what do you want to do? We can't carry on running like this. Either your family will catch up with us or Hunters will. Sooner or later. And like you said, we have four months till we need to be at the next stone.'

'I don't have a choice. I have to go and get the necklace. I've hidden it at the hotel we got stranded in at Christmas. The Starlight hotel, down in Cornwall.'

'That's on Grayson's turf. We could be seen.'

'I'll fetch it alone. Maybe, if we talk to Connor, he can create a fake trail. He's found that auction. Maybe we get the necklace and take it there.'

'You said she could sense it. How can we go and get it without her sensing it?'

'I don't know!' Gabriel groans angrily. 'Hence the fucking dilemma, Collins!'

Amara and I share a look. I have no idea how I feel right now. Confused? Betrayed? Angry? Hurt?

She looks livid so I'm sure that she has no idea about any of what they're talking about. Collins lied to her too. I turn back to Gabriel and watch as he continues talking to Collins. I won't jump to conclusions. I have to trust that there is a reason for all this. That he can explain what's going on. That it sounds worse than it is.

There's a loud thump and Amara falls unconscious at my feet. I spin round to see a fist flying towards my face.

Everything goes black.

The smell of petrol and stale cigarette smoke are the first things I notice when I come to. I open my eyes but see nothing. I'm shrouded in complete darkness. There's music playing somewhere and the sound of a car engine vibrates through my body.

I'm in the boot of a car, my hands tied together in front of me and tape across my mouth. I scream and kick, but the music drowns me out. The driver swerves and slams on the brakes time and time again, all the while I keep trying to find freedom.

There is none to find.

Hours pass. The fumes below make me nauseous. When the car finally stops and the engine is turned off, I await anxiously for the boot to be opened and some fresh air to finally reach my lungs.

The slam of the door closing rocks the car. The gravel below their feet crunch with every step. My mind races with suspicions of who has me, and prayers that everyone else is okay. Then, he talks. Not to me, but to someone else.

'She's in here,' he says, banging the boot. I don't recognise the voice. 'No one saw me take her. I knocked out the other one, Amara, and snatched this one up before anyone could see.'

He puts a key in the lock and turns it. When the lid opens, my kidnapper peers down at me. He's in his mid-twenties with black spikey hair and a little stubble on his jaw. He has a cigarette between his yellow teeth. I have no idea who he is.

Then another man steps closer and looks down at me. My blood runs cold as he grins.

'Miss Hooper,' Grayson sighs smugly, looking me up and down before laughing at me. 'Don't you look pretty. I have been searching absolutely everywhere for you.'

Grayson reaches out and grabs hold of my bound wrists. I yell and try to get him off, kicking and thrashing as violently as I can. But I'm hauled out of the boot and held tightly in his arms.

He turns me so we both face my kidnapper and Grayson keeps me pinned to his chest as I continue to try and get free. 'My orders were to inform me of their location and to follow them,' he says to the stranger. 'Not to take her yourself. Where are the others? My brother? Collins? Connor Quinn and the annoying brunette?'

The driver shrugs and takes a long puff on his cigarette. 'Dunno. I was on my own, saw an opportunity and took it. I saw them by complete luck, helping a young girl in an alley. I followed them, just

like you ordered us to do if they were seen, and when I could, I snatched her and drove her here.'

'How do you know they didn't follow you?'

'They didn't. I was careful.'

That makes my heart sink. Am I alone out here with them then?

'And why here?' Grayson looks around this empty carpark, lit only by a single lamp that flickers intermittently.

'They were talking about this place. Said that something was hidden here.'

I look over my shoulder and sure enough, we're at the Starlight hotel. Panic grips me.

'What's hidden here?' Hendrix asks. I spin my head and see him standing just behind Grayson. He doesn't even look at me.

'Something about a necklace.'

'Really? They said that?' Grayson asks excitedly. 'They said the necklace was here? At this hotel?'

My kidnapper nods and tosses the butt of his cigarette on the floor.

'That's what they said.'

Grayson spins me so our fronts are crushed together. He looks down at me with a victorious grin. 'Isn't that handy.'

I start hurling threats at him, but the tape over my mouth makes it nothing more than muffled nonsense. Grayson lifts his head and returns his attention to the kidnapper.

'I appreciate your efforts.'

'Surely I have earnt more than your appreciation?' he scoffs. 'I've proven myself, sir. Please, let me help you more! I could be your right-hand man. I could be-'

Grayson laughs hard and shakes his head. 'Because of you, my brother and his friends are still free. They're going to come for her which means I will be looking over my shoulder every second of every day. Your orders were to notify me of their location and follow them until I could get there. Now, I have no way of forcing this lovely creature in my arms to do whatever I want her to do, because I have no one she loves enough to maim in front of her if she disobeys me.' Grayson glances at Hendrix. 'Kill him. The way a vampire should kill a worthless piece of scum.'

'What?' My kidnapper gasps. 'No!'

I see Hendrix bare his teeth and lunge for the man. Grayson won't let me turn. He keeps me close to his chest. But I hear the scream. The tearing of flesh. The blood gurgling in the man's throat. The desperate pleas for mercy. It's not a slow death. It's not a painless one either. When the shrieking ends, he's dumped in the boot.

I look up at Grayson with wide and frightened eyes.

He leans into my face, his smile reaching ear to ear. 'Let's go get

your mother's necklace, shall we?'

We head towards the hotel.

The same neon light flickers overhead, just as it did the night Gabriel and I took refuge here after we chased down Toby in the snow on Christmas day. The closer we get, the more I start to sense the necklace. Exactly as I did when I went to get Rebecca's ring.

It's in there.

I'm shoved forwards, towards the entrance. As soon as we're inside, we see a desk. Sat at that desk is the same elderly man that I met last time. He lifts his gaze and pales at the sight of me being dragged in, bound, with duct tape over my mouth. I try to scream for him to run. As he lifts the receiver of his telephone, Grayson points a gun at him and orders him to put it down. He drops it from his fingers and raises his hands by his head.

Hendrix pulls out a photograph from his pocket and slams it down on his desk.

'Do you know this man?' he demands, pointing at Gabriel's image. The old man nods. 'How?'

'H-he has a room here,' he stutters.

'Number?'

'Thirteen.'

'Key.' Hendrix holds out his hand. The old man hands over the key, and Grayson shoots him in the face as a thank you.

I scream and lash out at Grayson, furious and horrified at killing such an elderly and defenseless person. But he just drags me down the hall without a word and without much difficulty.

We turn the corner and at the end of the hall is Gabriel's permanent room. My heart races. My mouth dries. My lungs and throat burn with my ferocious yelling.

Hendrix puts the key in the lock and turns it. The door opens with a creak and the light from the hall sneaks into the room. Grayson maneuvers me inside and flicks on the light. It all looks exactly the same as it did when I was here last. The books and bottles remain on the table. The bed sheets are still creased from the night I spent here with Gabriel, and call me crazy, but I can smell him. His scent is in the walls.

As Hendrix searches the room, Grayson kicks the door closed and tosses me onto the bed. As soon as I land, I sit up and lunge for the door. Grayson catches me by the ends of my hair and I'm thrown back onto the mattress.

'Move again,' he warns, pointing the gun at me. 'I'll shoot your knee caps off. You hear me, Miss Hooper?' He cocks the gun and waits with a raised brow.

I stay put.

Hendrix confirms the room is secure so Grayson lowers his weapon.

‘So, this is where my brother used to sneak off to. And according to our dead friend in the boot, it’s where he hid the necklace too.’ Grayson watches me with a smug grin. ‘How is it Gabriel has your mothers necklace, hmm?’

I can’t speak through the tape but I get the impression it was a mocking, rhetorical question. Yes, Gabriel lied to me about the necklace and Grayson knows that. He turns to the room.

‘Now,’ he sighs. ‘Where oh where could it be?’

I feel the magic the necklace is producing. I know exactly where it is. Even if I couldn’t sense it with my Sensativa, knowing Gabriel and knowing how he taught Toby to hide things of importance, I’m pretty sure I know where he’s hidden it.

Sure enough, Grayson heads to the windowsill where a dead plant withers in a small black pot. He shifts the dirt aside and recovers a key. After a few certain strides across the room, he pulls the chest of drawers away from the wall and finds that a square of carpet has been cut loose. He lifts it and prizes up a loose floor board.

‘So predictable,’ he mutters, pulling out a chest. He looks at me triumphantly. ‘Shall we take a look inside?’

Using the key, he opens it up and examines its contents silently for a moment. Then, he scoffs and shakes his head.

The first thing he pulls out is a pregnancy test. He places it on the bed and gestures for me to take it. I lift it up, my hands still bound together in front of me, and look at it. The window of the test is blank. The next thing he hands over is a red jumper. The same red jumper that was hanging on the wardrobe door last time I was here. Gabriel said it belonged to a friend. A friend he may have loved and that was now gone. Holding it in my hands and feeling it on my skin seems familiar.

‘What do we have here?’ Grayson ponders aloud. He has hold of a passport. Opening it up makes his eyes widen in surprise. Those surprised eyes then focus on me. ‘Sophie Roberts? Really? And what’s this?’ Inside are some other documents. He examines them all before handing them all to me. He watches me for my reaction so I’m careful not to show any. I reach over, open up the passport and see my picture. The name on it is Sophie Roberts. Tucked inside is a fake birth certificate and two plane tickets. Both are one way to Japan. And both dated more than two years previously.

‘What is this?’ Grayson asks, pointing to the items surrounding me. He glances back into the box. ‘Oh, now, this is interesting.’ He reaches in and pulls out a book. Not just any book. It’s a copy of Grimms’ Fairy Tales. He opens it up. Tucked inside the pages, tied together

with string, is a small bundle of papers. After a few moments of him looking through them all, he gets to his feet and sits beside me. Then he hands the whole lot over.

The book isn't just any old copy. It's the copy I lost all those years ago. It's my mother's book, or rather, my father's book. The doodles I drew as a child are on its pages. My eyes brim with tears. Those tears spill over when I see what the pile of papers actually are. They're photographs of Gabriel and me. More tears tumble down my cheeks as I look at the pictures.

Me sat on the bed, stuffing my face with food. Me, sitting by the window, reading. Gabriel and me beaming into the camera. He and Toby truly are brothers. They both hid me away like a secret. The more I look, the fog starts to lift. The black-hole that stole the events of the missing six-weeks explode into colour and my memories start flooding back. All thoughts of the necklace disappear. Grayson and Hendrix may as well be a million miles away.

Gabriel was telling the truth. I did know him before I met him at The Orchard.

I knew him very well.

Two years ago...

Toby had left, and as I watched him go, I was overcome with grief. I was going to lose my baby. I was never going to be free of this prison. My life, and the life of my child, was over. Then, through the soul crushing sadness and loss of hope, my Sensativa manifested. I felt Toby's magic for the first time ever. And I felt it fade as he walked further away from me. The manifestation was like a reminder, the universe was poking me and saying, "No! Your life, and the life of your child is far from over. You are a witch!"

I couldn't stay at Harry's house. Staying meant certain death for my baby. At least out there, we had a chance. So, I left too. I put on my mother's old boots, scooped up my book, climbed out of the window and I ran into the darkness after him. I ran hard and fast, like the Devil was chasing me. I knew that if Harry caught me running, I was as good as dead, but staying was not an option. As I ran after Toby, his magic started to fade. He was travelling faster than me. Perhaps in a car? He spoke of living by the sea and was heading towards the coast so I just kept going.

For days!

I stole warm clothes from a bag left outside a charity shop. I ate from bins and drank water from public bathrooms. I slept in alley ways or in barns.

I just kept going. Hood up and head down. I didn't know where I was going or if I would ever find Toby again. I had no plan on how I was going to get him to change his mind and help us. So, I just kept walking. I remember a woman waking me after I fell asleep in the doorway of a church. She fed me a good meal and gave me money and a phone number to call in case I needed help. She knew I was in trouble, but I was a witch and not safe with humans, so I left and threw away her number. She was kind. If Hunters knew she had helped me, even though she had no idea what I was, she would have been killed.

I carried on.

Until one evening when I started to feel a humming in the air. I followed it all the way to a dingy old pub at the base of a hill. I went inside but saw no sign of Toby. I continued to follow the sensation, all the way to a man who was leaning over a pool table with a cue in his hand and a cigarette between his lips. I stood beside him, hand

outstretched as I wove his aura through my fingers. He lifted his gaze before he took his shot and then slowly stood up. His brilliant blue eyes were wide and his lips slightly parted, causing the cigarette to fall to the floor. He took a step towards me and I flinched.

‘I’m not going to hurt you,’ he told me softly, putting out the cigarette beneath his boot. ‘I just... Are you...?’ He carefully lowered my hood, my red hair tumbled out. ‘Holy shit. You are. You’re a Hooper!’ He looked me over, his eyes narrowed and a deep furrow appeared in his brow. ‘Are you okay? You look like someone has beaten the hell out of you!’ He examined the bruises Harry gave me and gets angry. ‘Who hit you? Who did this?’

‘W-Will you help us?’

‘Us?’ he asked, glancing around the bar. ‘Who else is with you?’

I remember the world spinning and my legs giving out from under me. He caught me before I could fall and held me in his arms. ‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Lilly,’ I whispered, my eyes getting too heavy to keep open. ‘What’s... yours?’

‘Gabriel. My name is Gabriel. And yes,’ he said. ‘Yes of course I will help you.’

‘Gabriel...’ I repeated. ‘Like the angel...’ And then I passed out completely.

When I opened my eyes, I was in Gabriel’s room at The Starlight hotel. He had laid me in the bed and sat by my side waiting for me to wake, and when I did, I was absolutely terrified. But he was calm and gentle with me in every way. He spoke slowly and kindly. He gave me room. He didn’t touch me. I was still in my filthy clothes and the aftermath of my journey still laid heavy on my body. He gave me food and let me shower. I dressed in his clothes and ate some more.

I was too scared to talk at first. I spent most of those early days cowering in the corner like a frightened child. What if I was wrong, and what I felt in the air didn’t mean that he was a witch like Toby and me? Gabriel promised that he wouldn’t hurt me, or take me anywhere I didn’t want to go. The whole time, he tried to make me feel at ease. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to trust him. For days, he tried to get me to feel comfortable. We watched movies. He read to me. Made sure I ate and felt safe.

Three days in, he asked me outright if I had access to magic. I panicked and I ran. Before I could get to the door, he compelled me to stop and turn around. He even ordered me to hop on one foot, just to show that he could.

I knew then that he had the power to control others. He was a witch too, just like me. I burst into tears and fell into his arms. Relief washed over me like a tidal wave.

Sitting me down on the bed, he told me that he knew the Hoopers from long ago. That he knew that we were witches. And that under no circumstances should I be afraid of him.

He was the sweetest man I'd ever met.

So, I took a chance. I told him the truth.

I told him about Toby and about our relationship. About Harry's cruelty. I told him that I ran away from home and had nowhere else to go.

I told him that I was pregnant.

He went white as a sheet and sat in silence for a long time. After that, he seemed to pull himself together. We did another test just to be sure. When the two lines appeared, I was nervous. I had no idea how he would react. But with a warm smile, he rested his hand on my knee.

'Congratulations, Lilly. You're going to be a mum. And I bet you'll be a bloody brilliant one.'

'You do?'

'Absofuckinglutely. You've already been through hell to keep her safe.'

'Her?'

He looked down at my belly and tilted his head to the side in thought. 'Yeah. Totally a little girl in there.' He lifted his head. 'What do you want to do? I can track down Toby if you like? See if we can try and work something-'

'No!' I barked. 'No more Toby.' I shielded my belly with my arms. 'He's not a good man. Not like you are.' My cheeks blushed at my own words as Gabriel's eyes widened. 'Please. Don't find Toby. Don't take me home.'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

He clears his throat and gives a nod. 'Alright then. No Toby. No Harry. We'll figure it out just the two of us.'

The days passed, and with each day, he never left my side for long. We grew close. We became friends. One day he returned with piles of bags in his arms. Sat on the bed with my legs crossed, wearing one of his long-sleeved tops and a pair of jogging bottoms that were far too big, I watched Gabriel unpack them excitedly. Jeans with stretchy waist bands. Billowing blouses. And a beautiful red jumper which he hands me with an excited grin, and demonstrated how the belly stretches.

'I saw the colour and knew it would be perfect for you,' he beamed. 'You'll be big when winter comes and the colour suits you perfectly.' I put on the jumper and didn't take it off for days. It was the first new piece of clothing I had ever worn.

He started reading baby books with me. I laughed for an hour straight at his reaction to a television show he thought would be a good idea to watch. Watching women give birth is not for everyone and I found his horrified expression funny beyond reason. I giggled like crazy when he hid behind me as the woman started to push.

In the night, I would have nightmares. He stopped sleeping on the sofa and started sleeping beside me on top of the covers. Then underneath them. Then with me in his arms. I woke one night and lifted my head from his chest to find him watching me. The rain was falling heavily outside. The sound was blissful.

‘I think I might have feelings for you,’ he told me, stroking the hair from my sleepy face. ‘In fact, I know I do. I have really strong feelings for you, Lilly.’

‘I’m pregnant with another man’s child,’ I reminded him painfully.

‘I know. But that doesn’t matter to me.’ It was in that moment, as he rested his palm on my cheek, that I realised that all the weeks we had spent together in this room had been the best weeks of my life. I felt things with him, and for him, that I had never felt with anyone else. His touch didn’t hurt, but instead felt warm and comforting. He leaned in. We kissed. That was all. Just a kiss. But it felt so real and so deep that I knew we had something worth having.

The next morning, he told me that he was making plans for me to leave the country. To get out of England for good, to somewhere no one would ever find me. And my heart sank because I didn’t want to imagine a day where he wouldn’t be with me.

And then he asked, ‘Could I come with you?’

I was stunned. ‘You want to run away with me?’ I gasped.

‘Yes. I want to run away with you.’ He laid his hand on my belly. ‘I want to run away with both of you.’

‘Why? I’m damaged goods. Second hand-’

‘You’re the girl of my dreams,’ he insisted. ‘You’re funny and feisty and sexy. Even when you spend an hour throwing up every morning,’ he laughed. ‘I never want to leave this hotel room, but when I do, all I want to do is come back.’

‘Gabriel, you’re gorgeous. You could have any girl you wanted.’

‘I want you.’

‘But I’m going to have a baby. Then it will be sleepless nights and changing nappies-’

‘And teaching her to walk and talk. Reading her bedtime stories and showing her how to ride a bike. Hearing her call you mummy and me... Err... I could be uncle Gabriel. Whatever you want. I want to be with you, Lilly. I want to help you raise your daughter. I’ll be whatever you want me to be, because I’ve fallen in love with you. Completely and utterly.’ He looks down at my belly. ‘And with her

too. But if you don't want me to be-

'Japan.' I told him.

'Huh?'

'I've always wanted to see the Cherry Blossoms in Japan.'

'Then I will get you a plane ticket to Japan.' He stood and hung his head low, crestfallen. 'You'll have plenty of money, I'll make sure-'

'Two tickets,' I told him. His head sprung up. His eyes were on stalks.

'You mean...'

'I've fallen in love with you too, Gabriel.'

He whisked me up in his arms and spun me around, laughing and crying all at the same time. As was I.

It was weird. I thought I loved Toby. But I felt more for Gabriel in those five-weeks than I did in all the years I was with Toby. I felt like this was where I was supposed to be. With him. He was home, and I never wanted to leave.

It was the night before we were due to leave. Our bags were packed. Our tickets were on the dressing table tucked into my new and very fake passport. But Gabriel needed to get some cash and he wanted to wait until the last minute so as to not get caught out by his family. There was a knock on the door. I laughed, thinking that he had forgotten his key.

When I opened the door, I saw Toby instead. And he was furious. I slammed the door shut but he jammed his foot inside and shoved it back open. I tried to run. To call for help. But he was too fast. In the scuffle, my necklace broke and fell to the floor. A few punches and I was out. He took me. I woke occasionally as he drove. I was in the backseat of his car, bound and gagged. My head throbbed and blood filled my mouth as he cradled me in his arms. When I fully awoke, I was on the floor of the Miller's barn.

Toby stood over me and told me that I had betrayed him and that my betrayal would have consequences.

He said I had taken away my love for him. He'd lost my obedience and loyalty. He told me he was sure he would get it all back.

But first, he had to rid me of my "parasite". He told me that he had had a vision and saw my death while pregnant, and that even after all my betrayals, he couldn't lose me. He loved me too much.

I told him that if he hurt my baby he'd better kill me too.

Then Ava came. And they took my child from me.

Two days I laid on that barn floor in agony, writhing and bleeding, and no one helped me. The six men who stood over me as guards, laughed at me. They mocked me and taunted me as I lay at their feet. Toby told me he left a note for Gabriel saying that I'd changed my mind and decided to return to Toby. He also informed me that he had

messed Gabriel, telling him he had eloped with a girl he had gotten pregnant and not to look for him.

No one was coming to look for us. No one was coming to save me. And Gabriel believed I had left him for another.

That day, I closed my eyes and stopped moving. I slowed my breathing down as slow as I could. The men watching me called Toby, fearing that I was dying. He came. As I continued to feign unconsciousness, he felt safe enough to untie me with a plan to take me to a doctor. I tore off my binding spell and as soon as my magic returned, as soon as I was strong enough to fight back, I Broke. It was like the pain, anger and grief was amplified, enhanced by my magic. It was too much and I couldn't control myself. I couldn't save myself.

I didn't want to.

I tore the men to pieces. I broke their bones and skinned them alive. I cut them open and impaled them with pitch forks.

Vengeance consumed me.

With his men dead, I turned on Toby. But he attacked me first and when I was down, he fled. I returned home to seek more vengeance. Harry wasn't home. Neither were Christa or Simmons. I tortured a maid to find out where they had gone. I was told Christa had travelled to Portugal and Harry and Simmons were out scouring the country for me. I sealed the doors and surrounded the house in a ring of flames. No one could escape me. I stalked through the house in the dead of night, like a predator hunting their prey. My bare feet left bloody prints and staff hid from me. Four died at my hand in the first hour. I played with them like a cat would play with a mouse. I skinned them. I slowly cut open their bellies so their insides glided to their feet while they were alive. I made them watch as their friends died slowly and painfully, all the while knowing that they would be next. I was in no rush. No one could get in and no one could get out. But they had lied to me. Harry had gone, yes. Simmons had not. I was busy scooping out a maid's eyeball with a spoon when Mr Simmons hit me around the back of the head with a baseball bat. I was knocked out cold. When I awoke, I was in the cellar. Harry and Simmons stood over me as I knelt before them in chains with the binding spell in my mouth. I laughed. For the next two days, they surrounded me with misery. Not pain. Misery. They wanted to punish me for what I'd done so they left the pregnancy test Harry made me take in front of me. They smothered the walls in photos of my mother's dead body. They left me in my bloodied clothes and tormented me every hour of every day, and when they left me alone for the first time, I looked at that pregnancy test snapped in two by my feet. I looked at the faint little lines still visible, and started to cry. Because she was gone. Gabriel was gone. My freedom was gone. My future. Gone.

As I felt it all, I also forgot it all. Every memory that would lead me back to the Break was gone and I awoke with red hair in the darkened room of my prison with no memory of how I got there, no memory of Gabriel, no memory of the barn.

I stayed there until the day I heard Hendrix whistling at the end of the corridor.



Tears fall fast and plenty as I sit in my wedding dress in Gabriel's hotel room. I keep looking through the photos with the jumper, my book and the pregnancy in a neat pile on my lap. I was so close to having it all. So close to being safe and happy. Gabriel wanted the baby. He wanted me. We were going to Japan together. We were going to be a family. And for two years, he thought that I'd left him. That I had chosen Toby. And when he did see me again, I had no idea who he was. And he sacrificed us so I wouldn't remember the trauma I suffered. He started all over again with me instead of putting me through the agony of the truth.

That's why it never hurt when he touched me. Because deep down, I knew I could trust him.

I knew that I loved him. It was written into my DNA. A biological fact that will never change. As I clutch the pictures to my chest, Grayson stands and looks down at me.

'What is all this?' he demands, gesturing to the items I'm clutching. I glare up at him. In a swift move, he pulls the tape from my mouth. 'Tell me what all this means!'

'Fuck you,' I snarl. 'Go to hell.'

'Tell me-'

'I will never tell you anything. And you don't have any way to make me talk so-'

Slap.

He walks away and stops by the chest to retrieve the final item inside. When he faces me, in his hand is a simple black box. He gives it a slight shake and I hear the rattle of my mother's necklace.

Magic is right there. It's right fucking there!

My fingers twitch.

Grayson opens the box and pulls out the necklace. It looks just as I remember it as he lets it dangle from its chain. The magic within it screams for me.

I lunge at him, sprinting as hard and as fast as I possibly can, praying to reach him before he notices. But Hendrix notices. I forgot he was here. His hulking arms wrap around my waist and I flail in his grip. If I could just touch the necklace, just for a second, I know I

would have access to my magic and I know I could fight them off and return to Gabriel.

Grayson admires the jewel with satisfaction, before putting it back in the box and stowing it safely in his jacket pocket.

‘Now,’ Grayson sighs, returning his attention to me. ‘It’s time to go, Miss Hooper.’

‘I’m not going anywhere with you.’

Slowly, he stalks towards me, stopping inches from my body. He reaches out and runs his finger along my jaw. When I pull away, he grabs my chin and forces me to look at him. I hate him so much I want to tear his throat out with my teeth. With his free hand, he takes hold of my hip. I’m pinned between him and Hendrix. Both have their hands on me and the sensation is worse than acid. Grayson feels the material of my wedding dress and tuts.

‘This dress is not good enough for you,’ he whispers. ‘Much like the man you intended to wed. When we marry, you will be in the finest silk. I’ve always enjoyed my women in silk.’

‘If the day ever comes where you force me to marry you and I’m to wear something to match my groom, I’ll smear myself in dog shit. Even then, I’ll still be overdressed.’ He yanks me away from Hendrix and twists his fingers in my hair. His eyes flash with anger and his mouth forms a rigid line.

‘Hendrix. I need a moment alone with Miss Hooper. Go wait in the car, and here...’ Swiftly, he tosses the box containing my mother’s necklace to the vampire who catches it. ‘Keep this safe. We will be out shortly.’

‘Hendrix, please don’t leave me alone with him.’

I glance over my shoulder and see Hendrix lingering by the door. He looks between us, unconvinced that him leaving is the best thing to do.

‘Please.’ I mouth to him.

After a moment of hesitation, Grayson orders him to go once more. And with a small bow, Hendrix leaves, closing the door behind him. Grayson tugs at my hair and forces me to look at him.

‘You will pay for running from me and for every insult you have shown me since I dragged you out of that cellar you would still be rotting in if -’

‘Hendrix found me. Not you.’

Anger overwhelms him. I see it explode within him before he seals one hand over my mouth as he lunges forwards, only stopping when I hit the wall. His body pins me there, his face in mine and my voice stolen. ‘You say another fucking word, I swear I will break your jaw, Lilly. I have taken all I am going to take. I have heard all I am going to hear and you will – ARGH!’

My teeth clamp down on his hand and I taste his blood in my mouth. As he pulls away, I spit a mouth-full of it all over his face. He stands there in stunned silence before slowly wiping it away.

‘Don’t touch me, you vile pig.’

His fist moves so fast I barely see it, but I certainly feel it as it strikes my face. I land face down and fail to get back on my feet. The room is spinning and dark spots blur my vision.

Grayson kneels beside me and takes hold of the little finger on my left hand.

‘You will show me respect.’

Snap.

I scream as he dislocates the bone. He then takes my next finger.

‘You will finish my spell. You will return magic to my Descendants and I will rule over them all, and take back our rightful place in this world. I will be the most powerful Coven Leader of all time!’

Snap.

‘GODDAMN IT, GRAYSON!’ I scream, trying to pull away. ‘STOP!’

As I yell, Grayson hoists me back up onto my feet. I sway and the room spins. He takes my weight and strokes the hair from my face.

‘And then, Miss Hooper, you will become the mother of my children. Just as you promised you would.’

‘Gabriel will kill you for this, if I don’t kill you first.’ I snarl back, hating that I have no choice but to sink into his frame. I can barely keep my head up and he pulls me in as if we are sharing an embrace.

‘No,’ he sighs, kissing the top of my head. ‘He won’t. Because to do that, he’ll have to find me. It’s just us now, Miss Hooper. You, me and Hendrix. I will not let you marry my brother. I will not let you leave me again.’ He looks down at me as I peer up. ‘You are so beautiful.’ And then I see it. He has a lustful look in his eyes as they glance over my bloody face. He gently drags his fingers through the mess of my hair before letting his fingers trail down my arm, then my hip, then he takes a firm hold of my backside. ‘You are mine,’ he whispers. ‘Your body and your magic, it all belongs to me, Arianna.’ The slip of his ex-wife’s name passes him by. ‘If you kiss me now, I will wait until after the spell is done to start our family.’ He leans a little closer. ‘Kiss me like you kiss Gabriel. Kiss me like you love me. And I will be kind to you from here on out.’

He steps closer. His nose rests by mine. His breath lands warm on my lips. His unwanted hand starts caressing me slowly. I press my bound hands on his chest and try to push him off. He’s as unmovable as a brick wall, but as I rest my palms on his chest, I feel something in his jacket pocket. I stop pushing, and gaze into his dark eyes. I force the revulsion and panic from my face and attempt to look seduced instead. I stop trying to get away, and lean into him. Into his touch.

Into his arms.

'I've always wondered...' My lips brush his ever so softly. His breath catches.

'What? What have you always wondered?' he asks, smiling lustfully.

'What it would be like...' I stand on my tip toes and press my hips subtly into his, forcing my own version of a wanton smile. He starts walking forwards, pushing me back until I meet the wall. He lifts me, wrapping my legs around his waist and nudging himself firmly between my thighs.

I lean in for his mouth. My eyes close and I feel his hungry and wanting lips on mine. As his mouth opens and his tongue glides between my lips, I slide my fingers inside his jacket. He's so distracted with his obvious arousal and desperate want to kiss and touch me, he doesn't notice. I open my eyes. He's lost in the moment. Fully immersed in our kiss.

When I feel the cold steel between my fingers, I grab them and hold them. I bite his lip hard. He yells and drops me, staggering back a few steps and holding his bleeding mouth.

'You bitch!' He lunges at me with his fists clenched. I let him charge. When he's close enough, I take the set of keys I stole from his pocket and stab him right in the fucking eye with a chunky Chubb. He screams as I push it further and further in, twisting it as I do. Blood spurts out and slides down my fingers, but I won't let go. The thick grooves of the key grind against bone and whatever liquid is contained in an eyeball, oozes out.

I lean into his face. 'I've always wondered what it would be like to gouge out one of your fucking eyes!'

His roars are full of anger and pain but he's in so much agony he can't get his thoughts in order. He just keeps trying to back away as I keep charging forwards, twisting it harder and harder. He grabs my hand and bends it back. I have no choice but to relinquish the grip I have on the keys and as soon as I do, he punches me hard in the face. I go down but I go down with a laugh. A split lip and a bruise is worth what I've just done to him. I look up as he slowly pulls the keys from the bloody mess in his face. It brings with it whatever remains of his left eye.

'Well, that's not going to heal, is it?' I laugh hard. Tears in my eyes and ribs aching hard. He sprints forward and in a second he has me by my throat pinned to the wall.

'You took my eye, you little bitch!' Blood continues to trickle down the hole where his eye used to be. He's pale and I know he must be in a hell of a lot of pain but his adrenaline is keeping him on his feet. And I suppose he heals fast, so the wound may already be mending.

But that eye is gone for sure.

‘You will heal me.’

‘Sure thing. Just give me access to my magic, and I’ll get right on that.’

‘You will pay for this,’ he warns. ‘You are such a fool. You sacrifice so much for a man that will never remain faithful to you. You stand there in your second-hand wedding dress when I could have given you everything. The whole world. A loving marriage and more power, respect and wealth than you could have ever dreamed of, than any girl could have ever dreamed of. I was willing to look past all those scars and personality flaws because beneath it all, I still love you.’

‘I’m flattered,’ I gasp under his tight grip.

‘But you throw it all away, everything I could offer you, for a man-whore with pretty eyes and a sweet smile. You choose a man who can’t even father children when I could give you a family that would be more powerful than-’

‘I would never inflict on a child, the misery of having you as their father.’ His brow narrows with a twitch. ‘You make me sick, Grayson. You’re disgusting. You’re pathetic and worthless.’

‘Stop. Talking.’ He slams me into the wall and keeps me pinned by my throat.

‘Or what? You’ll kill me?’ I struggle to get my patronising laugh beyond his crushing fingers. ‘You took my magic.’ I shrug. ‘But I’ll get it back one day. I have taken your eye and I will never heal you. I have taken your home and turned it to rubble. I have taken your brother and soon, I will take your position as Coven Leader from you and ensure that every single Nomad knows exactly what kind of man you are.’

His chest starts to rapidly rise and fall. His whole face darkens.

‘You look mad.’ I tilt my head to the side and squint. ‘Your face is all fucked up so I can’t quite tell. Are you mad?’

‘You need to shut your mouth.’

‘You are as inadequate a man, as you are a witch, and you are a failure and an embarrassment as a Coven Leader. I know about your wife, Arianna, and your child. I know what happened to them during the war. They would be disgusted by you now. Repulsed. Ashamed. Thank God they never lived to see you become this... *thing*.’

I see something switch in his mind. His whole body reacts to my words and I know in that moment, I’ve said too much. The look he adapts is exactly the same as Toby would get when he was pushed beyond his limit. A handful of times I saw it in my former lover. When he caught Ryan raping me and the bloodshed that followed. When he saw a man touch me in a club and slit his throat. When I told him I was in love with Gabriel, not him. And again, when he attacked me in

the barn.

And now I see it in Grayson's eyes too.

Sense and reason have gone.

He's consumed by anger.

'Inadequate?' he jeers. 'You think me inadequate?' Blood still drips from his eye and the muscles in his jaw twitch. 'A failure, hmm? An embarrassment? My wife and child would be ashamed, would they?'

He tosses me across the room and I land on the floor in a heap, coughing and gasping. I don't waste a second, I get to my feet and run to the door. I get only two steps in before he has me again. Both his arms wrap around my waist and he lifts me clear off the floor. I scream and thrash as he carries me across the room.

'You're about to see just how inadequate I am,' he hisses in my ear. 'I'll show you. You'll see.' His hand paws at my breast and he aggressively kisses my neck as he walks forwards. I continue trying to get free but he refuses to let go. The front of my legs hit the desk. I reach back with my bound hands and claw at his face. I feel his skin break beneath my nails as I drag them hard across his flesh. Fresh blood slides down the tips of my fingers, but that doesn't stop him. He grunts and slams me face down onto the desk. His hand pins me down by the back of my neck. I continue to fight with everything I have as I fill with panic.

Not again. Not again! Please...

I let out the loudest scream I can muster. A high-pitched and terror filled cry, the force of which, burns my throat and tears at my lungs. It's cut short when he lifts my head off the desk by a fistful of my hair, and whacks it hard three times into the wood.

My body goes limp. The room spins wildly around me and I think I'm going to vomit. White spots blur my vision and my words become slurred as I tell him to let me go.

'You'll love me,' he snarls, kicking my legs apart as I try to regather my senses. 'And I'll love you.' He lifts the hem of my wedding dress up to my waist. 'As much...' The sound of his belt being undone, followed by the lowering of his zip. 'And as often...' His fingers hook into the waist of my underwear. 'And as *hard*...' He slides them down my legs and leans down so his mouth is in my ear. His arousal is pressing into me. 'As I want to.'

He stands up but keeps one hand flat on my back in case I try to move. But I can't. It's taking everything I have to keep conscious.

'You are *my* Arcane. Your Children will be *my* children. Your magic. Your obedience and your body, belongs to *me*. It was always going to, Miss Hooper.'

‘HENDRIX!’ I scream. If I can just scream loud enough, he’ll hear. He’ll come. I try to push myself up. But I’m too dizzy. Too uncoordinated. His hand holds me in place easily. He pushes my legs out when I try to close them.

‘I am more than fucking adequate, Miss Hooper. I’ll show you.’

‘Don’t!’

His fingers slide across my backside and then down. With a low, lustful moan, his fingers violate me.

‘HENDRIX!’ I scream as he starts moving them. Moaning and groaning as he tries to get my body ready for him. ‘HENDRIX, HELP ME! RAPE! RAPE!’

His body leans across my back as he rests his mouth to my ear. ‘No one will help you now,’ he says in a whisper. ‘It’s just us.’

In the corner of the room, the image of my Broken-self glimmers into existence, like a hologram, flickering to life. Just as she was in the pit at Dartmoor, with her bloody legs and deep welts in her wrists. Her ashen hair falls over her shoulders as she lingers, observing the scene before her with impassiveness. My eyes meet hers, and she grimaces at the tears sliding down my face.

‘Weak...’ she whispers. ‘So weak.’

Grayson pulls out his fingers and positions himself. ‘Now... let’s make a baby.’

The window explodes and glass showers us both. I hear an animalistic roar before Grayson is thrown across the room into the wall opposite and I slide to the floor.

After a second or two, Hendrix kneels beside me.

‘You’re alright, Little Witch,’ he says, gently picking broken bits off glass out of my hair. ‘He ain’t gonna touch ya again. I promise.’

‘Thank you,’ I whisper weakly. ‘Thank you, Hendrix.’

‘Well... I wouldn’t thank me yet.’ He stands and turns his attention to Grayson who is scrambling to his feet.

‘What the hell do you think you are doing?’ Grayson demands.

‘You aren’t to touch her.’ Hendrix shrugs. ‘I got my orders. Hurting the girl’s fine. But not fucking her.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Grayson laughs. ‘And whose orders are those?’

The door opens with a creak and someone walks in. ‘They would be my mine.’

I can’t move, but I know exactly who it is. The look of apprehension on Grayson’s face when he sees our sudden guest is well justified.

A fight breaks out between the three men. I hear it and the violence it creates. Furniture is destroyed. Bodies are hurled around the room. They yell, they laugh, they bleed. The knocks to my head have left me an unresponsive heap only capable of looking at the corner of the room where my Broken-self still lingers, watching the fight on my behalf. Each blink gets longer. The sounds around me start to muffle and the next time I open my eyes, the fight has ended. The mirage in the corner watches the victor head my way. The crunch of broken glass beneath feet gets louder and I’m struggling, really struggling, to remain awake. The feet stop close by my head and our eyes lock.

‘Oh, my dear sweet Red.’ Toby stands over me looking down with a sad and patronising look on his face. ‘What would you ever do without me, hmm?’ He crouches down and brushes the hair from my face. I don’t even have the strength to bat him away or to flinch. ‘He really beat the hell out of that noggin of yours, huh?’ His eyes glance over my body and he lowers my dress, covering my legs and giving me some modesty back. ‘Good job we got here when we did.’

‘W-we?’

Hendrix joins him and looks down at me.

‘She alright?’ Hendrix asks.

Toby eyes glint with mischievous delight. He spots the odd angles of my fingers and snaps them back into place, making me groan loudly in pain. ‘For now. But we better get her and Grayson nice and

secure. Gabriel's on his way. He'll be here soon. You get him. I've got my girl.'

'Sure thing, Boss.'

'Hendrix? W-what...? The room is spinning even more and the edges of my vision are going black. 'Don't... Don't let him take me. Please.'

'Oh, Little Witch. Why would I stop him when I've spent the last few months trying so hard to reunite the two of you?'

'W-what?' I look up at him, confused and betrayed.

Hendrix is heading towards the unconscious heap that is Grayson. 'You would have been with him much sooner, if the Nomads hadn't been so effective at driving him away from the house on Christmas.'

'Y-you let him in on Christmas night?'

Hendrix reaches down and picks up Grayson, tossing him over his shoulder with ease.

'I was so impressed that you had the guts to follow me,' Toby admires. 'But then Gabriel showed up and I lost my chance to take you. When Hendrix called and told me Daddy-dearest had gotten ahold of you, I rushed at the chance.' He trails his finger along my jaw. 'But my girl was much stronger than I gave her credit for and you royally kicked my ass.'

It clicks. All in an instant. It was Hendrix that went to get Toby after I fought him at the Traitor camp. Hendrix said he was gone before he got there, but he must have helped him escape. I knew there was no way Toby could ever have walked away from what I did to him.

Hendrix laughs. 'Ya were so busy checking all the Nomads thoughts, searching for a traitor, no one thought to check mine. Every time Grayson ordered one of your sessions I thought for sure he would get me looked at, that I would get caught, but his arrogance has always been his weakness. He never thought for a second I would betray him.'

'Y-you killed Jade,' I realise. I hadn't sensed Toby at the house that

night, it had to have been him.

‘It almost worked too. Grayson and Gabriel were hiding the gifts we was leavin’ ya. We had to get ya attention. Try and get ya outta the house. Ya got as far as the garden before lover-boy grabbed ya.’

‘I was waiting for you in the burnt-out orchard. I was so excited to see you again, but it just wasn’t meant to be.’ Toby busies himself with wiping blood from my face.

‘At the hotel, after I destroyed The Orchard, you were t-there when we discovered Ava’s... her invol...’ It’s getting impossible to speak, and my eyes are getting unbearably heavy.

‘I had to call her,’ Hendrix shrugs. ‘Tell her to get the hell outta there. She ain’t got your guts. Grayson would have broken her down and I would have been fucked.’

Of course it had to have been him. I hate myself for not seeing it sooner! Only Grayson, Gabriel, Collins, Hendrix and I knew we were going to the museum. No one else could have told Toby where to be and when. It was even Hendrix that come up with the idea to use Gabriel to compel the security guard to turn off the alarms. How could none of us see this!

‘All this time... you were Toby’s inside man? B-but... who shot Malcolm? Who tried to shoot me at the Traitor camp and hit G-Gabriel instead?’

‘Why, Ava...obviously,’ Toby laughs, shaking his head at my naivety. ‘She seems to think that my hobby of playing with you will get me hurt. Silly cow thought by killing you, she would save me and get me all to herself.’ He tuts and shakes his head. ‘She’s not a patch on you. You were perfect. So obedient and trusting. Ava occasionally thinks that she knows best. Such an unattractive trait in a woman. It was a shame Malcolm had to die. He was useful in that house. But he was going to talk. They always talk when Grayson gets asking.’ He lets out a content sigh before turning to Hendrix. ‘Have you got her Bloodstone?’ Toby asks him. ‘And her mother’s necklace?’

‘I sure do, Boss.’ He taps his pocket.

‘Good.’ Toby scoops me up in his arms. I groan in pain as he moves me. ‘Dump my big brother in the boot, Hendrix. We need to get out of

here. If we hang about any longer, Gabriel will find us.' Toby stands with me limp in his arms. His lilac eyes and half disfigured face are all I can see.

'What do you want from me?' I ask.

'What I've always wanted from you, Red.' He kisses my forehead and slides the tip of his nose along my jaw. He lets out a long and wanton breath. 'Your absolute and unequivocal love, obedience and submission to my every whim and desire. And trust me when I tell you, that you will give it to me.'

My eyes are too heavy. The world is fading into nothing. Gabriel is coming. He'll be here soon. If I can just stay awake! If I can just fight!

'That's it,' Toby comforts. 'Just let the pull of sleep take you.'

I see my Broken-self behind him, her eyes firmly on mine and Toby's words echo in my ears.

'I've got you now, Red. I've got you.'

My eyes close.

He's got me.

I wake on a cold floor. The sound of metal scraping on concrete is familiar to me as I move. I used to hear it all the time when I was in my uncle's cellar. I lift my hand to my throbbing head but see no chains around my wrists. My hands are no longer tied together. The front of my face feels battered and bruised. It's too tender to touch.

'You took some hard hits,' Toby says, from behind me. 'You'll be sore for a few days, I imagine. Here, let me help you to sit.'

He kneels by my side and takes my arms, maneuvering my body into an upright position. I can barely hold my head up. My stomach turns and the muscles in my abdomen clench.

'I'm going to be sick.'

'I think I have a bucket here. Hold on.' He leaves and returns quickly with a pail. I grip it tightly and heave into it. I still can't stay upright, so he lays me down on his lap, gathering the hair from my face as I continue being violently ill. I'm too hurt and tired to stop him placing me there. 'Grayson hit you pretty hard. You have a concussion.'

'Where am I?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'How long have I been here?'

'A couple of days. I was starting to think you were never going to wake up.'

I look around the room. It's small and made of stone, just like Harry's cellar, with a single door and not a window in sight. I push myself up and feel a weight around my neck. I look down and see a thick chain hanging from what I can only describe as a steel collar. The chain is connected to a stone wall. Toby takes the bucket and leaves it by the door as I sway and groan on my knees. The chain is solid. I give it a light tug and know that even when I regain my

strength and my senses, I'll never pull it free from the wall. Everything continues to spin. My ears ring and I feel so nauseous I just want to curl up in a ball and sleep. But Toby is here, so I *must* keep my focus.

'Don't strain yourself,' he coos, returning to my side and sitting on the floor with me. His hand makes gentle circles on my back. 'You're not getting out of that collar unless I let you out.'

'Then let me out.'

'Not likely.'

I shrug him off and give the chain another tug. 'What do you want?'

'I told you.'

I can't stop staring at his face.

'It's pretty hideous, isn't it?' He points at his scar and has a solemn smile as he does. 'People are scared of me now. A child cried when he saw me the other day.'

'People have always been scared of you. Now your outsides match your insides.'

'You used to like that. How I would scare everyone else but doted on you completely.'

'Doted on me?' I laugh, but only for the briefest moment. The noise hurts my head and I feel the need to vomit start to resurface. 'You tormented me. I just didn't know it at the time.'

'I loved you.' He guides my face to him. 'I still do. I showed you that the only way I know how. I hate that we have ended up here. As enemies.'

'I'm going to be sick again.'

'Your head hurts that bad?'

'No. You, saying that you still love me, turns my stomach.' I move away but don't get far before the collar whips me back. As I pull it away from my neck, hoping to ease how it rubs on my skin, I notice

that my engagement ring is gone. My eyes flick up to Toby and he shows me he has it. 'Give it back.'

He tucks it in his jeans pocket.

'You're never marrying my brother.'

'I'm not marrying you either.'

He laughs hard. 'I have no intention of marrying you, Red. I think we've established that that traditional relationships aren't really my thing.'

'Then what do you want?'

'I told you.'

'You want my submission but you will never have it. You want me to love you but I never will, so you may as well kill me.' I tug once more on the chain as my head starts to clear and anger begins to replace my fear.

'If it wasn't for me, Grayson would have-'

'I know what Grayson was about to do to me, okay?!' I pull my dress down and feel dirty at the memory of his fingers inside me.

'Well, perhaps a thank you? That's twice in your life I've stopped a man forcing himself on you.'

'Thank you, Toby. For stopping your brother from raping me. It was very big of you.' Every word is hissed and filled with venom. I hate that he's the one that saved me. I hate that I had to be saved in the first place.

'You are very welcome.' He crosses his legs and waits for me to say something else.

'Where's Grayson now?'

He produces a mischievous laugh which ends with him biting his lip and raising his eyebrows. Then, he whistles. Two short, sharp whistles which I know all too well. He used to do that to signal he was in my uncle's garden somewhere, and I would run to him with

excitement in every step.

The sound of Grayson yelling in fury and pain drifts through the door from another room. It's beautifully amplified by the stone of the walls. Ava's deranged giggle floats through the air as Grayson begins yelling threats at her. I glare at Toby who watches my reaction, and he loves the hatred he sees within me.

'I can't tell what I enjoy more. Seeing you smile as Grayson suffers? Or watching the fire of vengeance burn brighter in your eyes knowing that Ava Sinclair is here?'

'That same fire burns for you.'

'I saw you took Grayson's eye. If you like, I'll take his other one.'

'Saw? You were watching? Like you watched Theo hack off my fingers? Did you hide outside the window and laugh as Grayson whacked my head into the table and ripped off my knickers?'

'I got to you as soon as I could.'

'What's the purpose of this? You have to know we can never go back to what we were after everything that's happened. After everything you did. So why take me in the first place? What do you *want*, Toby?'

'You're not exactly innocent in all this you know. You did some pretty awful things to me.'

'You left us to die.' My hand rests on my belly and he sneers as I do. 'The woman you loved *and* your baby. That I can forgive because it gave me the courage to leave Harry's house and it led me to Gabriel.'

His face falls.

'Yeah. I remember. I remember that Gabriel and I were in love years ago and that he was going to raise the baby with me. That he was going to give us both the kind of life you never would and I remember how you took me from him and made him think I left him for you. Even that... maybe, just maybe, I could walk away from. But I will never forgive or forget the Miller's barn. That you had Ava hold me down while you did what you did. The same woman who then

screwed with me and Gabriel. And who tried to shoot me, almost killing Gabriel in the process. And then you cut off his arm and left him to bleed out. You fled like a coward.'

'You were going to raise my child with my own brother. The man who abandoned me to Hunters. He is the reason I Broke! And you chose him over me? That level of betrayal trumps anything, I ever did to either of you. You both betrayed me. You both-'

'He didn't abandon you. Your own stupidity got you caught. He showed me the memories of that day. He tried to get you to run with him, but you were stupid and insisted on fighting. Your fire spooked Gabriel's horse and he was barely conscious. The horse ran, he couldn't stop it. That was on you. Not him.' I lean towards him. 'And you didn't even want the baby! Why the hell would you care who raised it?'

'Because I told you. You can never have a child.'

'Because you saw a vision of me dying, right?'

He nods.

'Well, you will live without me either way. Why am I here? Just make this easy and tell me what you want.'

His fingers grab the chain connected to my collar and he yanks me towards him. I struggle to keep my hands and knees moving fast enough so I don't land face down on the floor. He forces a kiss on my lips but I bite him hard. His blood seeps into my mouth. He growls as I sink my teeth into him. It's a growl I remember well. One I used to enjoy because it's a lustful noise. Not an angry one. I relinquish my grip but he doesn't let me move away. He has me by the collar and as close as I could be.

'You want to know what I want?'

'Yes.'

'I want you back.'

'Kill me. Save yourself the bother because that is never going to happen.'

‘You think I want to be your boyfriend? That I want you to hold my hand and please me in all the ways I taught you? No. That’s not what I want. I don’t want the sad and broken little thing who loved me. Who was terrified of touch and scared of the world. No. I want *her* back.’

‘Her? What the hell are you on about?’

He trails his hand through my hair and holds the tangled braids in his hands. ‘When you Broke in that barn, I saw a creature who made my heart stop and my cock go hard.’

‘You’re disgusting.’ My hand slaps his. ‘Get off me.’

He yanks my collar closer. ‘She was fearless and powerful and so full of wrath and anger. What I saw you do to my men...’ He takes a sharp intake of breath through his teeth as he looks blissfully off to the side, as if remembering a beautiful dream, rather than the torture, mutilation and murder of six people. ‘Oh, Red. You hardly knew what you were doing but the skill and delicacy you wielded in tearing them apart was incredible.’ His eyes land back on me. ‘Until you turned on me, of course. Then I just got the hell out of dodge. But it got me thinking.’ He grabs my wrist and holds my hand up close to his still bleeding mouth. His skin is rough as he rubs my knuckles against his scarred cheek. ‘Your fire. The way you took control of the things and the people around you. God. It was incredible and I knew... I knew...’

‘Knew what?’

‘I had to have you. Just like that. I need you like me.’

‘Like you? You mean...’

‘White hair,’ he whispers, looking at the strands still in his fingers. His gaze lingers on my eyes. ‘Lilac eyes.’ He rests his hand over my chest. ‘And a heart and soul as unforgiving and alive as mine.’

‘If I Break, I’ll kill you. I know I will. I won’t care about Gabriel or Collins. I’ll just want you dead.’ I snatch my hand free. ‘I want to kill you right this minute and go to Ava and slit her open from the belly up. Carve out her insides just like she helped you do to me. If I Break, Tobias, you will be the first person I come after.’

He gives a low chuckle and shakes his head. His teeth clamp down on his lip once more. ‘No, you won’t.’

‘Yes. I will.’

‘No...’ He leans into my face and whispers, ‘You won’t. Because when you Break, I’ll have control over you completely.’

‘You will never have control over me again.’

‘You ever heard of Blood-magic?’ He tuts. ‘Of course you have. You made a Bloodstone with Grayson and he branded you using Blood-magic too. Well, did you know that there is a way, an old, dark and dangerous method that was lost to us centuries before the war, that allows the will of one to be given... or should I say... taken, by another?’

A wash of uncertainty travels over me like a cold wave on an icy ocean. This doesn’t sound good. ‘That’s not possible.’

‘*Tha mi a ’ruidhinn Scottish Gaelic,*’ he says. He laughs at my confusion. ‘The pages you were translating from Rebecca Hooper’s journal, Hendrix was sending me photographs of them and stealing certain ones I didn’t want Grayson to have. Like the one written in Scottish Gaelic which tells of a very special spell. I wanted you back before. When Hendrix told me he had found you in the cellar, I was desperate to get you back. I thought you were dead, you see. After you escaped the Miller’s barn, I thought Harry had killed you. I saw him bury a body in his garden. Guess it must have been one of the members of his staff you killed during your rampage. But when Hendrix told me he found you, alive, I wanted to make you pay for loving Gabriel. For choosing him over me. Trying to get you out of Grayson’s house and away from his watchful eye was near impossible. A few times, I got close. I almost gave up on getting you back and was going to settle for just killing you. But then, when I learnt of this spell written in Scottish Gaelic, I knew that killing you was not our destiny. So I took drastic measures. I got anonymous word to Theo telling him that you had been branded and were defenseless. Predictably, he attacked, and Hendrix was supposed to get you out and bring you to me. He even persuaded Grayson to hide the Bloodstone on him incase Dad managed to take him. But then you tossed poor Hendrix out the window and the plan went to shit. I’ve been trying to prize you away ever since.’

‘So you can do this... Blood-magic spell?’

‘Yep,’ he nods. ‘According to Rebecca and her brilliant journal, if a witch - say you - ingested another’s blood - say mine – *during* a Break... And if that same witch – say me - said a series of words in Latin while performing a few other rather unpleasant spell necessities, the will of that witch...’ He points at me and mouths “you”. ‘Will become theirs.’ He points to himself.

‘Really.’ I swallow hard, unsure if what he says is true, but fearing it nonetheless. ‘That seems unlikely.’

‘I guess we will soon find out, won’t we?’ I know the blood has drained from my face as I let what he has planned sink in. ‘So, we’re going to push you, Red. My friends and me. We’re going to tear you down and when you start to Break, when you mind and your soul start to crack, I’ll pour my blood down your mouth, slide in between your thighs and say that incantation. My will shall sneak in through those cracks and take you over completely. And then, just to make sure it’s worked, you and I will find Amara and do unspeakable and filthy things to her together. I’ll order you to kill and maim. To destroy our enemies. To make me happy in all the ways you used to with that sweet, damaged little body of yours. And you will be incapable of resisting me. Just like you were. I’ll get you back, Red.’

‘Why Break me first? If you want to take control of me just do it.’ My voice holds its tremble well. Better than I expected.

‘The spell won’t work unless done during a Break. My will can only take over yours when there’s a break for it to sneak in through. Like plaster, repairing a crack in the wall. But don’t fret, my love. When you Break, it’s freedom. No more guilt or fear. Nothing holds you back! I think that will probably be best for you in the long-run, considering all the things I plan on forcing you to do.’ He leans in. A malicious smile playing on his lips. ‘I’ll have an Arcane Witch as my very own toy. I can’t fucking wait.’

‘Never,’ I snarl back. ‘It will never happen because you will never Break me, Tobias Kendryk.’

He throws his forehead hard into my nose. Blood explodes over my face as I fall back into my previous dazed state on the floor. He crouches over me, angry.

‘My name is TOBY! TOBY SMITH!’

‘Your name is dead man walking.’ I cough and splutter as I shake away the fog. ‘You will never control me again.’

‘When you Break, which you will, you will be mine again. Completely. You will have no choice. And then the real fun can begin.’

‘For a Broken witch, you sure seem to care about getting me back. I thought the whole point of a Break is not to care.’ I sit and wipe the blood from my face. In a quick and dominant move, he pulls me close to his body and pins me to his chest.

‘Oh. I care. About me. About what I want. About what I desire. Together, we will return magic and rid this planet of the pests who claim they are superior to us. *Humans*.’ The word is said with vulgarity. Like it tastes vile on his tongue. ‘Witches are supreme beings. This world is *ours*. They stole it. I shall steal it back. Humanity will worship us. They will shovel our shit and grow us our food. They will wait on us, hand and foot. Clean us. Undress for us and serve our deepest and darkest desires. Just as they were born to do.’ As he talks so passionately about his new world-order, his arousal presses into my belly. I fill with a cold dread. Not only at his body’s reaction after what happened with Grayson, but also at the idea of millions of innocent people being thrown into chains and forced into servitude. Myself included, if what he says about the spell is true.

‘Why is Hendrix helping you?’

‘I promised to give him exactly what he wants. That’s all. When the Veil is down, he will use humanity to create a new race of vampires. A hundred-thousand of them, who will serve as our military and help us reclaim this world from those who have spent so long trying to wipe us out completely. They will farm humanity and their blood will sustain our vampiric soldiers. The rest of humanity we will enslave. Kill. Torture. Whatever I want. Just as they did to us.’

I shake my head in disbelief, which is foolish. How could anything he say or do ever surprise me?

He stands and looks down at me. ‘I want to enslave everybody. I will rule over all. Hendrix and his vampires will be my army. You will be my power. You will be strong enough to destroy towns and kill hundreds without even moving a muscle. I will share with you the immortality spell and no one, not witch nor human, will ever put an end to us. Me and you, Red. A world made to our liking.’

‘To your liking.’

‘You will be my queen. I’ll satisfy you. The same as I always did. You’ll be well fed and want for nothing if that makes this any easier for you. Not that I particularly care what you think. We will be perfect together! I’m a volcano and you’re an earthquake. We set each other off in all the best and all the worst ways. That’s why we’re so brilliant together. Two of the most powerful forces in the world. If we work together, we can save every single witch on this planet and create a new world-order where witches rule. Where witches are free. And humanity will bow down to us, just as they should.’

Silence. His eye twitches as he waits for me to speak.

‘Well? What do you think of my plan?’

I sit up and push my face upwards to him and with a sneer on my face I tell him, ‘I think it’s as insane as you. And you will never succeed.’

‘Oh no?’ he laughs. ‘And why is that?’

‘Because to get me under your thrall, to perform your spell and turn me into your slave, you’ll have to Break me first. And I won’t let you. I’m stronger than you now, *Tobias*.’ I lunge forwards and sink my teeth into his neck. He roars as I clamp down as hard as I can and with my hands I claw at his already mangled face. The metal door flies open and Hendrix rushes in to drag me off. I scream threats and kick out as Toby holds his bleeding neck and looks at me with a weird fascination. Hendrix’s grip is unbearably tight and he’s not even struggling.

I watch Toby stand and stalk towards me as Hendrix keeps me pinned. ‘Oh, I will Break you. And between me and you, Red, I will enjoy every single second of it. I can’t fucking wait. You made a big mistake betraying me. And an even bigger one when you burnt off half my fucking face.’

‘I’ll do something much worse than that when I get free. I promise you.’

He storms forward, blood seeping down his shirt and hatred creasing up his face. Snatching my chin in his hands, he slams his lips

onto mine. Hendrix keeps my arms held tight with his thick and immovable biceps. Toby lets me go making a loud smacking sound.

‘The only way you get free is when you Break and are once more under my control. Let’s get started, shall we?’

Toby lingers by the door, pacing back and forth like an excited child. He never looks away from me. Not once. His eyes are narrowed on me completely, and mine on him. I remain chained low to the wall, unable to stand or move further than five feet. I try hard not to let panic take me. I must think of some way to get out of here!

Grayson continues to yell in the other cell as Ava tortures him and Hendrix is laying out a series on instruments on a steel table to the side of me. A bowl. A funnel. And a knife. He lays them all down with care and precision.

‘Did he do this to you?’ I ask Hendrix, finally looking away from Toby. ‘Does he have control over you and your actions?’

Hendrix snorts. ‘No. Don’t be stupid. He has to fuck his puppets to make them compliant. My boat don’t float for dick, Little Witch. And Vampires can’t suffer a Break, so...’

‘Then why are you helping him? Hendrix,’ I say in the calmest tone I can muster. ‘Whatever Toby has promised you, you have to know he’s lying. He will never-’

‘I’m going to stop ya there, Little Witch.’ He leaves the room but soon returns with a strange grey box which he sets up beside the knife. He starts unraveling cables, not even looking at me as he carries on talking, setting up whatever it is. ‘I’m doing anything I need to do to return my species to the world. You have no idea what it’s like being the last of your kind. I *need* my species back. Toby has made me guarantees that outshine Grayson’s halfhearted promises a hundred-fold.’

‘Don’t do this. Help me get out of here. I can promise you-’

‘Nothing. Ya hate me. I know ya do. Ya think I’m disgusting and what I am is grotesque.’ He trails the cable to the door. Both he and Toby look at me smugly. ‘I ain’t helping ya out of those chains. I ain’t setting ya free. You’re just my boss’s property. I was ordered to keep ya safe until he could get ya back, so I did. If I didn’t, then our deal

would be off. That's all.' After shoving the plug into a socket, the grey box starts projecting white light on the wall almost entirely. Hendrix turns to face me. As we stare at each other I see a flicker of guilt on his face. Something I have never seen on him before but it is unmistakable. I wasn't ever expecting to see it there and I'm sure he wasn't planning on feeling it either, but I grab the chance.

'Please,' I ask in a sad whisper. 'Hendrix, please, help me. I promise you I will help you when the Veil is down. Just... Don't let him take control of me like this. I don't want to Break. I don't want to destroy humanity. I don't want him to touch me the way he wants to, please. Please, Hendrix. I don't hate you and I know you don't hate me either. We spent time together. We had a connection. You know we did.'

Toby glances at him to see what reaction I have stirred. Hendrix walks towards me and kneels in front of me. Toby's fists clench and his black and white flames flicker to life, just in case.

'You said I was your friend. This is wrong. What he wants to do is wrong. It's not the way. I know the right way. I know how we can save everyone. Toby doesn't want to save anyone, he just wants them to suffer.'

'I know you're scared, Little Witch. And if I'm being honest, even if Toby hadn't ordered me to stop Grayson, I would've, cos yeah, I do like ya. I meant what I said about considering you a friend. You're a tough chick and I admire that. I do. But this is bigger than me, and it's bigger than you. Humanity's time is done. The age of magic and vampires is here. And we need your Arcane magic to win this fight.'

'There doesn't need to be a fight.'

'Yes. There does.'

'I just want to go home, Hendrix. I'm getting married.'

He shakes his head sadly. 'No. You're not.'

'I don't deserve this. And humanity doesn't deserve a Broken Arcane under the control of a psychopath.'

'You needn't think of a Break as a bad thing.'

'It turns you into a monster. I don't want to be a monster.'

‘But don’t ya see? Ya already are a monster, Little Witch. We all are, because that’s what humanity has turned us into. A cornered lion will lash out. An injured dog will bite. And when a person has been hunted and persecuted their entire life, they do dark things for the right reasons. Let Toby have his revenge on ya for what ya did. Let him settle the score. He’ll Break ya and his need for vengeance will be satisfied. Then you’ll go back to how ya were together all those years ago and eventually, ya probably won’t even mind being under his control. It’ll be just like the good-old-times.’

I look at Toby briefly as he watches our exchange uneasily. ‘Like when he killed my baby? *Those* good-old-times?’

Toby shows me a sarcastic sneer.

‘Despite what you think, he does care about ya. You’re all that man thinks about. He has risked his life over and over just to get ya back. Damn, he killed his own kid so ya wouldn’t die. Even though he knew that ya would never forgive him for it. Say what ya will about a Broken Witch, I don’t think it’s as cut-and-dry as not carin’ no more.’

‘I’m supposed to be thankful?’ I ask, disgusted at every one of his words and the sincerity he dares utter them with. ‘What he did to me was as far from love as possible.’

‘He saved your life. That baby was going to kill ya and then die in the long-run anyway. You die, Hunters will kill us all. They ain’t fuckin about with swords no more. They’ve got fucking nuclear bombs! Without you, we don’t stand a chance. We all owe him our thanks for makin’ that hard choice.’

I lean in close to his face. ‘You’ll regret saying that. Mark my words, vampire. You’ll regret it dearly.’

Any hope of Hendrix helping me leaves as quickly as it came. The vampire is completely under Toby’s thrall. The same as so many others. My past-self included. Toby could captivate anyone. I saw it time and time again. His ability to force his will on others. Make them do what he wanted. Behave how he wanted. His beauty. His rare kindness and frequent cruelty. His every word chosen and delivered with perfection. And he has Hendrix now. I see Toby smile his cruel sneer from the door as Hendrix stands and returns to his side.

I sit straighter and hold my head high. The chain is heavy around my neck and I'm tired and sore from the last few days. My beautiful dress is all I have as a comfort. My only link to Gabriel who must be out of his mind with worry.

'The problem with your plan is that it will never work,' I tell them both as they fold their arms across their chests, laughing at my attempt to display defiance. 'You spent so many years teaching me how temporary pain is. My pain threshold is unbelievable. You will never Break me.'

'I don't plan on Breaking you with my fists, Red. I don't intend on hurting your body because yes, I did do such a good job at making you strong. But while I was busy making your body tough, I was also tearing down your self-worth and sanity.' He taps his temple with his finger. 'I plan on breaking your mind.' He rests his hand over his chest. 'And breaking your heart. Every time you have gotten close to Breaking, it was when your sadness and hurt got too much. You forget, I know all your triggers. All the darkness inside you. So... let's see how much anguish we can put you through, shall we?'

My legs clench together. He sees and shakes his head.

'I know how you fear the touch of another. And Hendrix here, as well as several of my other loyal men, have all offered their services in the event I fail in *my* attempts. And if I do fail, I will call them here to this house, hidden in the woods miles from civilisation, and they will have their rather brutal way with you. But call me selfish, I don't want to share you unless I have to. So, for now, it's just us. Let's try my way first, shall we? And then go from there.' He gives two short, sharp whistles. Grayson's yelling stops and a heavy door opens down the hall. The rust on its hinges groan, and when it closes, the thud echoes around us. Delicate little footsteps travel down the hall until Ava appears in the middle of the two men. Bruises mark almost all of her face and her hair has been hacked off. She beams down at me, the split on her lip cracks and starts to bleed, but she pays no attention. She clings to Toby's arm and gazes up at him in childlike awe. He doesn't even react to her appearance.

'What happened to you?' I ask.

Toby answers. 'I was annoyed that I failed to get you back at the British museum. Ava very kindly allowed me to take my frustrations out on her.' He looks down at her and smiles a sickly grin. 'Didn't you,

kitten?’

She nods keenly, beaming like a child being praised for doing a good job. ‘Anything for you, baby,’ she giggles.

I shuffle on my knees, loathing the short length of my chain. My heart races in my chest and every beat pumps hatred and anger through my veins. I feel it. It’s so hot it burns. My skin hums as if my bound magic wants to spew forth and kill them all on my behalf. I taste it in my mouth. Like licking a battery. I smell it. Like burning rubber.

Toby looks back to me. She stands on her tip toes and kisses his cheek. ‘Grayson’s such a fun toy to play with. Thank you so much for-’

‘Hush.’ Toby’s word silences her instantly and she continues looking up at him with admiration. ‘It’s time to play with our *new* toy now.’

Ava looks down at me and a flicker of jealous rage attempts to swallow her up. But with a few blinks, she gets it under control.

She smiles a feminine version of Toby’s callous grin. The way she delicately bites her lower lip and how her eyes sparkle with joy as I have no choice but to kneel before her, makes my fingers tingle. The flesh of which longs to grip her neck or feel the warmth of her life’s blood drip slowly down them. I clench my fists tightly together. My nails dig into my palm and it’s only *my* blood I feel warm my extremities. She dances on her toes, bouncing up and down in childlike excitement at whatever is to come.

‘LILLY?’ Grayson hollers from down the hallway. I hear he’s struggling to catch his breath and is obviously in pain. ‘LILLY, YOU STAY STRONG. YOU DON’T LET HIM WIN, YOU HEAR ME?’

When the man that attempted to rape me is the only comfort I get, I know I’m fucked.

Toby kicks the door closed.

The question of what the grey box is for, is soon answered. The lights are turned off and an image of me appears on the wall.

A video.

Ryan is positioning his camera phone on the old dresser in my attic bedroom. I’m asleep in bed behind him. I watch as he sneaks across the room to me.

‘What is this?’ I ask, my eyes wide at the enormous image before me. ‘Toby... What-’ Ryan yanks the covers from the bed and the version of me on the video goes to scream.

‘You didn’t know he used to film his attacks?’ Toby asks, sauntering towards me. ‘Neither did I. Not until I took his phone and had a good look. Fifty-three videos. Two hundred and eight photos. All of you.’

I close my eyes and cover my ears as the video starts to play out. My screams and cries make me feel sick. Toby wants me to watch so he pins my hands behind my back. I may have to listen, but I won’t watch.

‘Ava, my sweet. Fetch the knife from the table. My girl here won’t look so I need you to cut off her eyelids for me.’

I quickly open them. Ava looks disappointed when Toby tells her not to bother. He’s kneeling behind me now, his chin resting on my shoulder as he forces me to watch.

‘Toby... Please...’ I try to get him off, but each attempt makes his grip tighter. His mouth goes to my neck and his heavy breathing is both angry and excited. Then, as the video on the wall continues, he starts kissing my neck. His teeth nip my skin and his tongue trails upwards.

In the corner of my eye, I see her. She flickers into life for the briefest moment, watching the images on the wall with her hands behind her back and an interested expression on her face, like a connoisseur, trying to figure out a Picasso. My Broken-self turns, peering at me over her shoulder. She smirks, before flickering out of sight.

‘Keep watching, *Lills*.’ Toby draws out the nickname Ryan used for me. ‘Remember his touch. Remember how he hurt you. Remember it all.’

Ava is giggling in the corner, watching the video with joy. Hendrix looks at the floor.

I feel the memory of Ryan’s touch. I feel the fear he used to inflict on me and the dread I would feel every time he was close.

From the corner of my eye, I spot my Broken-self wandering around. I try to follow her, but Toby won’t let me look away from the video.

So I watch. He touches my body and caresses my skin with his mouth and tongue.

I don’t blink. I refuse to. My eyes become dry and my vision blurs. They burn with the need for moisture but I refuse to give it to them. I keep watching, seeing nothing more than out of focus, fuzzy images. In my head, I create Gabriel’s voice. He’s reading to me. Reciting every bit of my Cinderella story. His voice drowns out my muffled crying that echoes around this stone cell of mine. Toby continues

kissing my neck and whispering taunts into my ear. It's half an hour before he realises I've gone stock-still and drifted into my own world. He starts yelling and shaking me. When I don't respond, I get a hard slap. I blink some much-needed moisture back into my eyes and let my senses return to the here and now. I look up at Toby.

'You think I survived all those years of his abuse without learning how to separate myself from his attacks? Ryan is dead. These images are just light and colour. Want to know where I was just now?' I tap my temple. 'With Gabriel. On a beach. Happy.'

He tries to contain his temper.

'I want more projectors,' Toby orders. 'And the biggest speakers you can find.'



Time has lost its meaning. Day. Night. It's all a mystery to me. I've been here for days now. My head hurts with the excruciating volume of these videos. Every wall and even the ceiling is covered in Ryan's footage. My screaming and crying all overlap as different videos play out. The others have left the room to eat and sleep. I lean against the wall wanting so much to sleep but if I close my eyes for too long, the door opens and a bucket of ice cold water is thrown over me by Hendrix.

When the sound disappears but the videos remain, I worry I've gone deaf. But then Toby returns to the room and I hear him loud and clear.

'I brought you some food.' He holds up a tall mug of steaming soup. I take it. I need to keep my strength up and maintain my senses. But I only manage a couple of sips before he takes it back. He filled it all the way to the top only to deprive me of enjoying it all. I try to keep hold of the mug but I fail. So, I spit my mouthful of chicken soup in his smug little face. Thick cream sauce drips off his features and his smirk turns into a grimace. He takes off his black t-shirt and uses it to wipe himself clean.

'You still have your spirit. Shame. Let's try something else, shall we? No more naps and a different film.'

'Bring it on.' I lean back against the wall and straighten out my wedding dress which is now completely ruined, but I still love it. It's all I have. Around Toby's neck is a chain. Hanging on that chain is my engagement ring. I sense the magic from my mother's necklace close by.

The images on the walls go white and are soon replaced with other videos. These ones hurt my heart. It seems Ava also enjoys filming. And she filmed every night she shared with Gabriel for some sick

reason. My eyes are dry from days of barely any sleep. My ears are still ringing from my past screams and now I'm being beaten by Ava's over the top moaning.

'Why film this?'

'I asked her to. Just in case you ever returned.' He leaves, laughing as he closes the door. I pull my knees up and rest my head on my arms.

'He didn't know,' I whisper. 'He didn't know. He didn't know.'

I force my mind away from this hell. I cover my ears to drown out the noise. I get two minutes of respite until the door opens as it always does when I try to shield my senses. I'm showered with ice cubes and freezing water. I lift my head and gasp at the sudden chill. Hendrix lowers the bucket and undoes his flies. Then starts urinating into it.

'His orders,' he says, gesturing over his shoulder. He finishes and puts it by the door. 'If you close your eyes or cover your ears again, I'm to throw this over you instead of the water. Just... Break already, would ya?'

'I'm sorry. Is my torture upsetting you, Hendrix?'

'More than I thought it would, yeah.'

'My heart bleeds...'

He leaves and kicks the door shut as he leaves, sealing me in this dungeon once more.

Hours pass.

My body starts to shake. I feel a chill start to stir under my skin and I'm beginning to perspire. My eyes glaze over and when I blink, Ava is standing in front of me.

'Your eyes are open, but you seem far away.' I guess she's right because I didn't see her walk in. She nudges the bucket with her foot. 'If you close your eyes, I get to toss this over you.'

'Get gone, Ava.' My words come out in a garbled slur and I don't have enough strength in me to lift my head.

She erupts in laughter. 'What the fuck is wrong with you? You sound like you've had a stroke.'

'I haven't slept in days. The body needs sleep.' I raise my hand which is hard work to do and rub my eyes aggressively. No way am I going to be showered with urine. The video is still playing. She takes a moment to watch her own show.

'Does he fuck you like that?' she asks, pointing to the ceiling. 'Gabriel? He's got stamina, huh?'

'He looks me in the eye when we're together. He tells me he loves me. And I orgasm at least twice before he does. Then after, we fall asleep wrapped around each other naked and holding each other close, so no, Ava. Gabriel doesn't fuck me like that.' I point upwards.

‘Even my uncle’s dogs were more into the leg they were humping, than he is into you in any of these videos.’ I furrow my brow. ‘Does Toby still fuck you from behind like he used to back when we were together? You know, he used to watch *me* when he was with you.’

‘Only to make sure you were watching us.’

‘No. It was to keep his dick hard,’ I laugh. ‘Does he even screw you now? HEY!’ I yell to the door. ‘TOBIAS? DO YOU STILL FUCK AVA? OR CAN YOU ONLY GET IT UP WHEN I’M THERE?’

‘Shut your fucking mouth,’ she hisses.

‘Oh dear. I’ve struck a nerve, huh?’ It takes a lot to force the cruel laughter I do. My head is still swimming with exhaustion and I’m starting to feel a little delirious. So I don’t see the heel of her shoe till it pounds my face. Strangely, I don’t feel pain, but I feel the thud as the back of my head hits the wall. She’s screeching like a woman possessed as my head wobbles from side to side. I laugh with blood between my teeth and dark spots blurring my vision.

‘You think you’re funny?’ She turns and grabs the pail of urine before returning to me and sealing my nose shut with her free hand. The pail is over my face, the liquid within it an inch from spilling out. ‘When you open your mouth, I’m going to pour Hendrix’s piss down your throat. Now, *that’s* funny.’ My lips seal shut. I will not open my mouth. I’ll suffocate first. Her fingers pinch my nose even tighter. ‘OPEN YOUR MOUTH!’

The next thing I see is Hendrix throwing her out of the room. Their words are mumbled over the still playing video. But whatever he says has her storming off. Hendrix looks down at me.

‘Ya alright, Little Witch?’

The extra hits to my already battered skull is too much. ‘I’m... going... to... be-’ I wretch and fall, ending up on my back, gagging. I watch him rush over as I start to lose consciousness.

She’s there again, watching me, her arms folded across her chest and her ashen hair falling over her shoulders.



My bout of unconsciousness has refueled me a little and when I open my eyes several hours later, the videos are off and the room is empty. Not even my ghostly friend is here. It was actually Grayson’s voice that returned me to the world of the living, travelling from down the corridor outside my prison.

‘Lilly? Lilly? Are you alive? Speak. Say something.’

‘I’m alive,’ I groan, rubbing my head. I don’t even bother trying to sit myself up. I remain on my side on the floor and the metal collar is still firmly around my neck. ‘How long have we been here?’

‘About a week.’ He then goes on to tell me to be strong. To stay me. To not let them win. It all fades away as I lie motionless and sore on the floor. His words of comfort are meaningless to me.

A week? How can it be a week?

I wonder where Gabriel is. If he and my friends are okay. Does he know who has me? Are the Hunters closing in on everyone? What if I don’t get out of here before the Blood-moon and my chance to finish the spell is lost for good?

My stomach flips as I push myself up. The room spins and I feel so nauseous, I wretch. But there’s nothing in my system to expel. As I try to breathe through it all, I feel something else. It suddenly springs into existence and at first, I have no idea what it is.

A small flutter of warmth from deep inside my belly. Like a tiny little fire spluttering to life. I lay my palm over it... and feel it hum. Ever so slightly, but I know I feel it.

Magic.

Magic inside me. Something that’s connected to the Arcane realm, just as Gabriel is, and Collins too. The way their magic feels in the air, I feel it now coming from inside me. It’s not my own and I have no access to it at all. But I feel it there. And it feels like... like... love! Unconditional and innocent love!

‘That’s not possible,’ I whisper, resting both hands on my stomach. ‘How is this possible?’

Heavy footsteps start to get closer from down the hall. I lower my hands and watch the doorway anxiously. In walks Hendrix. His arms cross over his chest as he shakes his head and tuts at me.

‘You’re a tough cookie. Ya know, Toby’s gonna have me fuck you soon. He knows you fear touch and I don’t wanna alarm ya, but I’m not exactly small down there. You’re so little I might split ya right down the middle. Can you please just Break?’

‘I’m hungry,’ I blurt out, as my heart thumps harder and fear dries out my mouth. Because now I am really terrified of how far they’ll go to Break me if they figure out what has just happened.

‘Yeah, yeah. I’ll get ya some food. Hold on.’ He turns to head out and grab me something to eat but his feet slow to a stop at the threshold. He sniffs and starts looking around the room with a confused look on his face. ‘What’s that noise?’

‘What noise?’

He turns and sticks out his ear, straining to hear. I strain to listen myself but hear nothing different.

‘What can you hear?’

‘Shh!’ He rests his finger on his lip and slowly starts walking around the edge of the room. ‘What the hell is that?’

‘What?’

He walks slowly, running his hand along the wall and looking up, down, and all around for the mysterious noise. He stops by my feet and squats down. His ear lowers. And then his dark eyes lift to mine.

‘Oh my god,’ he whispers. ‘There’s a teeny tiny little heart, beating inside your belly.’

I shake my head violently.

‘No. That’s not – I’m sleep deprived and-’

‘Pregnant.’ He stands and steps back. ‘You’re fucking pregnant! Oh Christ.’

‘Hendrix... I-’

‘But this is perfect! I did wonder. When you healed lover-boy after he got his arm hacked off. I wondered what else you might have fixed. He’s knocked you up!’ He claps his hands together making me jump. ‘And if there’s one thing we know for sure what will make you Break... Yes! Finally, this can end!’

‘No!’ He turns and goes to the door. I try to stop him but the chain yanks me back. ‘NO! HENDRIX, PLEASE! DON’T TELL HIM! HENDRIX!’

‘It’s okay, Little witch. Once it’s done and you Break, you won’t care about that little heartbeat anymore. I promise.’

He’s gone. The sound of his triumphant laughter fades as he goes to fetch Toby.

I’m shaking and dizzy with fear for the soul that just sprung to life inside me. I must be at least three weeks pregnant if its heart has only just started beating. A baby conceived with love and so will be born like me. It already has its connection to the Arcane realm. I can feel it.

‘Grayson?!’ I scream. ‘GRAYSON?!’

‘What? What’s happened?’ he calls back from down the hall.

‘I’m pregnant. I’m-I’m pregnant and Hendrix knows. He’s going to get Toby. Toby will kill it to make me Break again! Oh god. Grayson, you have to help me!’

‘Pregnant?’ he repeats in shock. ‘That’s not possible. Gabriel can’t have-’

We both hear Toby’s voice which sounds livid and violent. Hendrix is with him. I hear them talking quickly.

‘Grayson... Grayson?’ He’s gone quiet, but I know that if he wants anything, it’s a powerful child. ‘This baby will have magic. I feel it now, inside me. It will be an Arcane. You have to help me save it!’

‘You sense it?’ he asks in a rush. ‘With your Sensativa? You sense it now? LILLY? DO YOU SENSE-’

‘Yes! Yes! I sense it! It’s heart just started beating and... and Hendrix heard it. I felt its connection to the Arcane realm being created. Grayson, please. Help me.’ The footsteps get closer. And closer. ‘Grayson?’ He’s gone deathly quiet. ‘GRAYSON?!’

Toby appears in the doorway and yes, he's infuriated.

'Well, isn't this just fucking perfect,' he spits. 'Grayson won't help you, you fucking whore. How dare you!'

'Don't do this, Toby.' I shuffle back. 'Please... Don't!'

'Hold her down,' he orders Hendrix, as he points a trembling finger at me. Ava appears behind him looking gleeful.

'Let me hold her down. Oh, please? Please, baby? Let me hold her down.'

'Fine. Ava, my sweet. Hold her arms above her head. Hendrix, get her legs.'

'Grayson?' I call out fretfully as I rise to my knees, ready to fight them off. 'Don't you dare touch me,' I warn them. 'Don't you dare. I will kill you. I will fucking kill you!'

'Maybe we should let her keep it for a bit?' Hendrix offers. 'Wait till she gets attached. Ensure she Breaks.'

'I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU!' I encircle my arms tightly around my middle and tears start falling fast down my cheeks. I back up until I'm pressed to the wall. 'You won't take my baby. Not again. Not again.'

'She's attached.' Toby surveys me like I'm filth.

'GRAYSON!' I scream, clutching my belly.

They both head towards me.

'GODDAMN IT, GRAYSON! IF I BREAK I SWEAR TO GOD-'

'EGO-VOS-ACCEPTERE!' Grayson yells back. 'SAY IT. SAY IT NOW!'

Hendrix grips my ankles and yanks them out from under me. I scream and kick as he stretches me out and I claw and hit out at Ava as she giggles while trying to get hold of my hands.

Behind Toby, my Broken-self watches.

'FUCKING SAY IT!' Grayson roars. 'IT'S A SUMMONING SPELL. SAY IT, AND YOU'LL TAP INTO YOUR BABY'S CONNECTION TO THE ARCANES REALM!'

'Cover her mouth!' Toby orders. 'QUICKLY!'

'EGO-VOS-ACCEPTERE!' I yell out before anyone can stop me.

There's one hell of a surge from inside me as soon as the words are said. My chest fills with air as I gasp deeply and my whole body vibrates.

Rebecca Hooper's words and wisdoms rush back to me and I remember all that I lost. But that's not all I have back.

I have magic!

A wave of power ripples out of me with such force, Hendrix, Ava and Toby all fly through the air and crash into the stone walls. I roll onto my side, holding my belly protectively as the magic my tiny baby provides gives me the power to save us. I see Toby scrambling down the hall like a goddamn coward, looking back over his shoulder, terrified of me.

No way.

I reach out and use my borrowed magic to drag him back in by his ankle. He claws at the ground, desperate to go anywhere but back in the room with me. When he's in, I close the door, locking them all in with me.

Because I am done.

I am done being taken from the people I love.

I am done being chained up.

I am done being hurt.

I am done with these people who think they can do whatever they want with me just because I was born the Arcane and no one... No one! Is taking this baby from me.

'From us!' My Broken-self finally speaks to me as she lingers by the door. 'It's time for revenge. It's time to secure the safety of our child's future.'

I stretch out my hand and pin them all to the wall. They claw at their throats as if they're being strangled. Their feet kick out and their eyes bulge as their faces redden. I wrap my wrist around the chain tethering me to the wall and tear it free. Chunks of stone, tumble to the floor. I get to my feet, panting and shaking from the shock of what almost happened. And filled with anger at what they dared try and do to me.

At what they've done to me.

As I wield this power, I feel the strength of it start to wane slightly and worry that I am draining strength from my sweet little flame, flickering inside me.

I look at Ava and drop her down to the floor.

My eyes blacken.

'Go and get my Bloodstone and my mother's necklace. Do nothing else. Go get them and return to me as fast as you can. Now.'

'Don't, Ava,' Toby gasps, struggling against my disembodied hold.

She spins on her heel and runs out the room. As I wait, I walk to Toby and look up at him. I reach out and clasp my engagement ring

from the chain hanging around his neck, and snap it off. When I slide my ring back on, I peer up at him and tut three times.

Ava's hurried little footsteps echo down the hall. She sprints in the room, pale and sweating, before stopping by the door. Her whole body is shaking tremendously as she looks helplessly at Toby. In her hand is my Bloodstone, as well as my mother's necklace.

'Give them to me.'

Her feet shuffle forwards as I make her come to me. She holds them out in front of her.

'Stop!' Toby gasps. 'Ava, do not give them to her!'

'I can't stop myself!' she wails. 'Toby... Toby...'

I splay out my fingers and open my palm flat. She rests them over my hand, and drops them into my grasp.

As soon as I touch the Bloodstone, I stop channeling anything from my baby and take it all from that instead. I feel the real connection to the Arcane realm in a way I never did before. I truly didn't know what I had. Not a clue. I fill with strength. With power. There is no need to use the magic in my mother's necklace. Not now I have my own connection back.

I use my Physical magic to heal myself. The bruises. The cuts. The aches and the exhaustion, they all disappear. My muscles feel new and strong. The fear I had dissipates. I have no need for it. Not now. Because not only do I have my magic back, but I'm also armed with all the information Rebecca shared with me. And within that knowledge is a spell that will ensure this never happens to me again. I put on the necklace with the Bloodstone attached, kissing it lovingly as it passes my lips.

'*Qui tibi vult mortem,*' I chant, using the tip of my nail to cut the skin over my heart. '*Mea. Et mea vos eorum quod.*'

The stone glows a bright red. Tiny sparks of lightning shoot out and travel gently across my chest and inwards, through the shallow incision, all the way to my heart. It tingles. It's familiar and loving. Like a long-lost companion glad to be home. I then put on my mother's necklace and they hang side by side.

'W-what did you just do?' Ava whispers. Her eyes are wide and watching the Bloodstone with terror.

'I just performed a spell to stop anyone taking the Bloodstone from me. If anyone tries, their heart will stop beating for good.' I look up at Toby. 'The stone is mine. And mine it shall always be. I am once more... The Arcane. Brand be damned.' I start to laugh. My chuckle echoes all around us. I stand, still with the collar and chain around my neck.

'So, what now?' Toby grunts under the pressure I have on his throat. 'You're-'

‘Shh,’ I say gently, holding my finger to my lips. My eyes are still black and he has no choice but to obey. This angers him greatly. Much to my amusement. ‘I’m not Gabriel. You can’t deny my words. No matter how hard you try. I am power beyond anything you have ever seen. I have knowledge inside me that no one alive has ever even heard of. And I am a mother who will do anything to protect her child. The child of your brother. Now hush, Tobias, and wait your turn. I have something particularly special planned for you.’ I slowly turn my head, and look at Hendrix. I release my grip on him and he slides to the floor, landing on his feet as he always does. He bares his teeth and gives me a snarl as he prepares to lunge at me. I hold up my hand and keep him exactly where he is with such little effort, it’s funny.

‘Hendrix. You betrayed me. Conspired against me. Hurt me and the people I love. I plan to return the favour.’

‘Ya gonna kill me?’

‘No. I’m going to destroy your life. Just as you have tried to do to me. I want to take away any hopes you had for that vampire revival you did all of this for.’ I run my tongue over my teeth. ‘You need the poison in your teeth to turn humans into one of you... right?’

‘Yeah,’ he snarls.

‘Good. Hendrix... Pull out your teeth. Every. Single. One.’ I hitch an eyebrow expectantly and watch as slowly, he reaches in and takes hold of one of his teeth. ‘Your fangs first, please. Pull them out and put them on the floor in a neat little pile.’ He starts breathing furiously as he does as I order. He takes his fang and roars as he begins to pull. The sound of it being wrenched from his gum is satisfying to say the least. He places it delicately on the floor, all the while, glaring at me like a murderous animal.

‘I will kill you for this unless you stop right-’

‘No speaking. More pulling. There’s a good vampire. Carry on.’ I nod to his mouth which has a small bead of red blood traveling down his chin. ‘Every single one.’ As he reaches in, I look at Ava. She looks ready to pass out. Her eyes are locked onto Toby as her lip trembles.

‘Ava, you see that bucket there?’ I nod to the pail by the door. The one filled with Hendrix’s urine. The one she tried to pour down my throat. ‘Pick it up and come back here.’ She turns and clumsily walks over to fetch it. Her feet are uncoordinated and her breathing is jagged. But she retrieves the bucket and returns to the exact spot she was just in.

A smile pulls at the corner of my lips. ‘Drink it.’

Hendrix yells as he pulls another tooth and places it with the other one on the floor.

Toby continues to struggle against my hold on him.

But I just look at Ava as she raises the bucket to her lips while sobbing.

She tips it up, and starts to drink.

Her deep gulps mix with her gagging and coughing.

'Now... That's funny,' I laugh.

Hendrix yanks out another tooth.

'Christ. That's disgusting,' he says quietly, reaching in to remove yet another tooth.

Her desperate and agonised wails are music to my ears, and when she finishes, she drops to the floor and starts retching.

'Do not be sick, Ava. You keep it all inside you.' I almost sing the order and although her body convulses with the need to throw up and expel what she's just ingested, she keeps it down, just as I've instructed. Hendrix pulls another tooth. His mouth is gushing blood now and he's also starting to shake. The roots of each tooth are enormous. Far longer than a human's. And for the first time ever, I see Hendrix is really in pain. Not only that, but genuinely upset. He looks at each lost tooth with heartbreak.

I take the collar and rip it off my neck before dropping it. The chain detaches and slithers around me like a serpent. I lean down and it slides into my hand, snaking its way around my wrist as I walk forwards. My filthy hem trails behind me as my bare feet walk silently over the cold stone. When I reach Ava, I tap the end of her nose.

'Your turn.'

I strike her hard across the face and remove my control from her. She lands on her back, claspings her face. I lift my foot and with all my own strength, bring it down on her knee. Her bone breaks and she screams out before trying to crawl away from me. She starts screeching. Pleading.

'HELP ME!' she cries, clawing at the floor as she hauls her body across its surface towards Toby. 'BABY... HELP ME!'

I take hold of her ankle and pull her back.

I take a handful of her hair and smash her face into the floor, dazing her. Then I roll her onto her back. I stand there, a foot each side of her hips and can't help but laugh. I look to the table. The knife is still there. The one Toby had placed there in preparation for when I Broke. I summon it. It flies through the air and lands in my hand. I let my fingers feel its blade. It's sharp.

'Yep. This will do perfectly.'

She raises her hands up as if to calm me, but trembles uncontrollably.

'Lilly... Lilly, please... don't kill me.'

'I begged you to stop. I begged you to let me go.' I tilt my head to the side. 'Did you?'

I lower myself onto her thighs with my knees placed each side of her. With a slow blink, I turn my gaze from her face to the knife in my hand.

I copy her high-pitched whine, mimicking her voice and the words she used the night she held me down in the Miller's barn. *'Focus. Do it!'* I say. *'You have to. Do it, Toby! Do it now!'* With the tip of the blade, I lift up her shirt, exposing her belly. *'Toby... I understand. He has no soul. No conscience. No humanity. But you? You're not Broken. So what's your excuse, huh?'* I notice something on her stomach. *'Now what do we have here?'* I see the faintest remainder of two delicate little scars exactly where mine are. Hers are neat and virtually invisible. Unlike mine. My eyes blacken. *'Show me. What are these marks?'* I feel her temple and delve into her mind. I see it easily and quickly.

The truth.

I let go of her head and look at Toby.

My rage increases tenfold. My eye twitches with it. My instincts are to kill him. To send the knife in my hand straight to the spot between Toby's eyes. I grip it tighter in my now shaking hand to resist the temptation.

'You... you never had a vision of my death,' I tell him. His mouth goes into a tight line as he continues trying to maintain his composure. Hendrix is still pulling his teeth off to the side, but no one pays any attention. *'You never even had a vision. Your mother did. She told you what she saw and you told Ava. You... you are such a fucking, lying piece of shit. You! You!'* I point the knife at him. *"What you create, my sweet boy, will kill you".* I repeat the words his mother spoke to him moments before her death. Her vague warnings, delivered by her vision, that destroyed my life. *"Your love will bring life in this world. And its creation will kill you".* I shake my head. *'That's why you did it?'*

'I will not be killed,' He gasps. *'Not by you. And not by my own child.'*

'And you?' I look down at Ava. *'You let him sterilise you?'*

She gives a series of short, sharp nods, too terrified to actually speak.

'And you killed my child, to protect him?' I point the knife in Toby's direction as I feel the hot venom of my wrath start to rise up my throat. *'You held me down, and helped him do what he did to-'*

'Yes. Yes, I did. Because I love him, Lilly Hooper. More than you ever did or ever could. And I would do anything to save him.' She finds her voice and although it shakes and is high-pitched with fear, she's sounding pretty certain of her choices. *'His child will kill him. That's the prophecy. I did what I did to keep him alive. To keep him safe. And I'd do it all over again because that's love. That's devotion.'*

I lean down into her face. 'No,' I snarl. 'I'll show you love. I'll show you devotion. By getting revenge for the life you snubbed out. And from the life you tried to take again.' I use my magic to pin her arms above her head and her legs down straight. I cut the front of her top straight up the middle and then, slowly, and with precision, press the blade into her gut. As she screams and kicks out below me, I drag it across her skin leaving a gash trailing from her abdomen to her ribs. Blood spews out and covers my dress.

'You emptied me out. You took something from me that I will never get.' I position my hands above her incision, the tips of my fingers ready to dig into her and pull out her insides.

My eyes blacken and I order her to stay conscious. I order her to stop screaming. Her eyes are full of tears. They stream down her face as she watches me. A pair of bare feet step closer and stop by her head. I look up and see a far too real Broken Lilly watching me.

'Do it,' she whispers, grinning wickedly. 'Empty her out, just like she did to us.' She lowers herself to her knees and watches with glee. *'Rip out her innards and leave them on her chest so she has no choice but to see them.'*

My fingers sink beneath her flesh. Warm blood spills between my fingers. Ava squeals and judders below me in agony.

'Do it! Do it!... DO IT!'

With a blink, I stop. What the hell am I doing? I want her dead, yes. I want her to suffer too. But not like this. I retract my hands and lean over her, my face an inch from hers.

'You tried to take Gabriel from me. And now, before you die, you will watch as I take away the only person you love in this whole world.' I turn my head, and narrow my full attention on Toby. My Broken-self flickers from beside Ava's head, to Toby's side. 'You will watch him disappear. And then you will die. But don't worry, I didn't damage your organs too much and the blood loss will take a while to kill you, so you have a good couple of hours of agony to get through yet.'

I stand. My dress is drenched in her blood. The whole skirt is red and my hands and arms are bloody too. I make my way towards Toby with determination coursing through me, and stop before him. His feet still hover several inches from the ground and he claws at his throat, fighting against my disembodied grip. Our eyes lock.

'I loved you,' I tell him painfully, hating that I have the slightest pang of guilt at what I'm about to do to him. 'I loved you so much. I think back, and I can't remember who I was before you. I don't think I really existed at all. I just occupied space and used up oxygen. I was breathing, but I wasn't living. I had a heartbeat, but I was dead inside. And then you exploded into my life, and the more you broke me down

and tore me up, the more alive I became.'

'Because we're the same...' he wheezes. 'Both broken souls, needing someone else to fix us. You're in my head, Red. You're in my heart. Always.'

I let him drop to the floor.

'That's bullshit and you know it. It's time for me to break *you* down and tear *you* up.' I step closer to him. 'It's time for me to kill you.'

He coughs and gasps in as much air as possible before forcing himself to his feet. Only when he lifts his head do I see he's laughing.

'We both know you won't kill me.'

'Yes. I *will* kill you.'

'Then Gabriel will die too.' He shrugs.

'No. He won't. Because I'm going to kill *you*, Toby. I see your reaction when I call you Tobias. You fear that name, because you fear him returning and you disappearing. You fear having to live with what you have done.'

His smug smile disappears and an anxious uncertainty takes its place. He has one eye on the door as he creates his fire on his hands.

'You can't force me-'

'Let's get the youngest Kendryk back behind the steering wheel... shall we?'

'You think you can guilt me into turning on my humanity? Please... You think far too high of yourself that anything you could say or do would ever make me want to-'

I grab the sides of his head and dig the tips of my fingernails in deep. I'm almost crushing his skull.

'What are you doing?!' He tries to prize my hands away, but now I have access to my Physical magic, I'm too strong for him to fight off. 'Get off me!'

I dig my nails in. The pain I'm inflicting has him on his knees, yelling furiously. His flaming hands claw at mine, but as soon as he burns me, I heal.

I take several very deep breaths before joining him on the floor. Both on our knees and facing each other, I look into his lilac eyes for the last time. Never again will they look back at me. The eyes that once belonged to a man I loved and desired beyond sense or reason. To a man that saved my life, only to mutate it and control it in its entirety. To a man that crushed my soul and my bones and then my heart. To a man that I feared. Admired. Adored.

"What you create, my sweet boy, will kill you". That's what she said, right? Your mother? After she had a vision? *"Your love will bring life in this world. And its creation will kill you"*. I don't think she meant your baby. I think she meant me. You created me. Your love brought this version of me to life. I was a good person. I never wanted to hurt

anyone. Not until you made me want to hurt them. So, I will kill you now, Toby Smith, and make sure you can never hurt me or anyone else ever again. I will compel you to die.'

'You-you can't do such a thing!'

I nod. 'Yes,' I reply, in a simple matter of fact. 'Yes, I can.' My eyes go black and his widen in terror. 'Turn it on, Tobias Kendryk,' I order. 'Turn on your feelings.' I reaffirm my grip as his eyes widen. 'Let it all in. Remove your Break. Fix it. Seal it closed and let it all back in.'

'N-no...'

'Yes. Let in your fear. Let in your pain. Let in your guilt and your sorrow. Let in the humanity that you have spent so long without.' His eyes start to flicker. A hint of hazel returns to them. I channel more power into him. I force more will into my words. 'You will feel all the guilt of what you have done in your life as a Broken witch. You will feel all the pain you inflicted on others. You will remember it all with the same soul you had as a child. You will return to the boy that wept for Rose as she lay in chains. You will once more be the empathetic boy that loved his mother and risked everything to save his brother from Hunters, and when you are whole, when you are back to feeling everything the Break has stopped you from feeling, you will never forget a single thing you did.' More hazel appears as he yells and tries to get away from me. The roots of his white hair start going dark. I channel more of my will into him. It's a huge drain and my head is starting to pound at the force of this command. Blood trickles from my nose, but I'm so determined, I won't stop. 'Tell me. Tell me what you have done to me!'

'I-I... Oh God.'

'TELL ME!'

'I lied to you!' He cries, tears sliding down his cheeks. More brown claims his hair and his eyes are now completely hazel.

'All you did was lie to me. Tell me what you did! Say it!'

I expect a confession of his actions in the barn.

That's not what I get.

'I knew you were in the house for years. From when you were six years old,' he sobs, more tears spilling over his face.

'I know that. I saw the photos you had before Ava shot Malcolm in Grayson's study. Tell me what-'

'I knew Ryan was abusing you!' he yells desperately. I let go and stagger back. He falls forwards. His body judders like he's laughing, but when he sits straight, I see it's genuine crying. His hair is chestnut-brown now and his eyes are just as they were in Gabriel's memories. He looks completely different. His whole face is etched in horror and self-loathing but when he looks up at me, there's a childlike pain in his eyes.

'You... you what? Tell me!' I order. 'TELL ME NOW!'

'I saw him. I watched him... hurt you. For years.'

'Hurt me?' I swallow painfully. 'Or rape me?'

His hands grab at his hair like he can't understand what he's admitting to. 'I would sit at the window and watch him with you.'

The urge to vomit contorts my insides. 'And you... you just...'

'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I-I never... I-'

'Why?' I feel the betrayal of such a confession stab at my heart. 'You saving me from Ryan was the only good thing you did for me, and now you tell me you knew he was doing it? And you let him? Why?'

'He wanted you as low as you could go.'

'He?' I choke.

'My Broken-self.'

'So, you. You're not separate people. You're one person and you did this to me! Why?'

'So...' He takes a hard breath. 'So he... I mean... I, so I could fix you and make you his-mine. Mine. I wanted you so damaged that when I came to save you, you would love me.' He can't look at me as he speaks. 'How could I do that? How could I have done... Oh God... the barn. I-I... Oh God... My own child!' He starts retching and vomits on the floor while shaking his head. 'Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.'

I crouch low and he lifts his traumatised face to my furious and hateful one. My eyes are still black. 'What else have you done and not told me about?'

'I don't know. It's- It's...' He shakes his head while his eyes dart in every direction. There's a deep furrow of confusion on his brow. 'It's all jumbled. My memories aren't in order and I can't see them clearly.'

'You will remember it all. Those memories will settle and they will never leave you. You will live with this for the rest of your life, Tobias. You will never forgive yourself. And if you ever feel any joy, even for a second, you are compelled to inflict upon yourself, something awful that you inflicted on another. No action of yours can endanger your life. You will not take anything to numb your pain. And you will remain loyal to me. My slave. My pet.'

'Please...just kill me,' he whispers. 'I can't live with what I have done.'

'Tell me you understand your punishment.'

He blinks as even more tears tumble forth.

'Tell me you understand!'

'Yes.' He cries, looking up at me defeated and devastated. 'Yes. I understand.'

I glance over my shoulder to Ava, who watches on in misery.

'Toby Smith is gone.' I wipe away the final tear I will ever shed for

Toby Smith. 'He is never coming back. Tobias?'

'Yes, Lilly?' Tobias replies, in a weak whisper.

'Tell Ava the truth. Did you ever love her?'

'No.'

'Did you ever like her?'

'No, I didn't.'

'And before you returned, were you in any way sad that she was dying in front of you?'

Ava's lip wobbles.

'No, Lilly. I didn't care. I was... indifferent.' His answers are truthful, but delivered with sadness. He doesn't want Ava's dying moments to be of heart-break. I on the other hand, am thrilled that this is how she will fade from this world.

'Did you hear that, Ava? Indifferent. Wow, that is such a beautiful word, don't you think?'

'T-Toby?' She reaches out weakly for him. 'Baby? D-don't leave me... I love you... I-I need you.'

'I'm sorry, Ava,' Tobias whispers. 'But Toby is gone. And he is never coming back.'

'W-will you hold me?' she whimpers, her fingers stretching for him. 'P-please... let me die in his arms.'

I watch him, and let him choose his own path. His own words. He struggles to decide on what to do. Finally, he shakes his head and looks away from her. She sobs desperately at his rejection, and her outstretched arm falls limp.

I stand and look between Hendrix and Ava. He has no more teeth to pull, so I instruct Tobias to collect them all up off the floor. He does, and I head to the door. He scurries after me. I turn back with my hand on the handle.

'I'm locking this. Hendrix, you will not attempt to leave this room. Ever. If you get hungry...' I nod to Ava. 'You can lick up her blood from the floor.'

'This isn't over,' he lisps, with blood pooling in his mouth.

'It is for you. No one will find you here. I'll make sure of it.'

'I guess I'll see you in hell then, Little Witch.'

'I look forward to it. Enjoy your time together.' I give him a wink and a half-smile as I close and lock the door. The sound of the barrel clicking into place and sealing for good, echoes down the hall. I breathe easier, like a weight has been lifted from my chest. I trace my finger down the steel of the door and give it a light tap. 'Two down...' Tobias drops a single tooth on the floor. It rolls under my dress. I pivot my head in his direction.

'I-I'm sorry,' he whispers, crouching down and reclaiming it. He drops it three more times as he trembles all over. He keeps his head

down, but his eyes keep glancing upwards intermittently.

‘Are you scared of me, Tobias Kendryk?’

‘I-I-I-’

‘Must I compel you to speak the truth? Because that may annoy me.’

‘Yes.’ He nods and stops with his head so low, his chin is buried deep into his neck. ‘Yes. I am afraid of you.’

‘Toby Smith. Scared of me.’ I find that amusing and more than a novelty.

‘I am not Toby Smith any longer. That man... he was... he was...’

‘He was?’

‘Evil.’ The words get stuck in his throat.

‘Do you think me evil too?’

‘You?’ Slowly, he lifts his terrified eyes and I’m still bemused at how human and innocent he looks. And also, how haunted. A self-loathing and shame has already buried so deep into himself he will never be free of it. ‘You are a creation,’ he says.

‘A creation?’

‘You were right. I created you. We all did. The anger in you and the pain, it was put there. By me and by so many others. Even if you had not compelled me to remain by your side, I would still stay with you. I took so much from you. And now, I give you freely whatever you desire. My life is yours to do with as you please and I expect pain and vengeance. It is what I deserve.’

‘Are you trying to make me feel guilty? Need I remind you-’

‘You do not need to remind me of anything. It may be jumbled right now, but I know I have done heinous acts. I do not intend to make you feel guilty for a single thing. I deserve any suffering you wish to deliver.’

I notice how differently he speaks. More polite and concise. A little like Grayson does. An out-of-time tone that would suit a well-to-do man from centuries ago.

‘Will that make it easier for you? To deal with the knowledge of all you have done by spending your days suffering? Like somehow, your misery is a method of repayment? Of justice?’ I turn to face him. I’m a good head shorter than him but that doesn’t stop me being his dominant right now. ‘An eternity being fucked by Lucifer in the pits of hell and skinned alive every day would not square you up with anything you have done.’

‘No,’ he whimpers, looking to the floor. ‘It would not.’

‘Now then...’ I look down the hall. There’s another metal door further along, and standing outside it, waiting patiently, is the mirage of my Broken-self. ‘Let’s go see your big brother, shall we? I have one more score to settle before we go find my fiancé.’

Grayson is looking extremely poised and calm, considering his situation. He surveys me standing in the doorway, covered in Ava's blood with my Bloodstone and mother's necklace around my neck, and small red flames licking at my fingertips. He's still in his white shirt and black trousers, but they're filthy and bloody. His face is bruised and cut, his cheek swollen. The eye I took is healing, but it is most definitely gone for good. His hands are bound in front of him and he too has a metal collar around his neck with a thick chain tethering him to the wall.

'Miss Hooper,' he greets, with a rigid jaw.

'Rapist.' I nod back in an equally courteous manner. 'You have no intention of trying to run? You know I am free and I am sure you heard what I just did. Why are you just sitting there?'

'I've been trying to get out of here for a week. I can't.' He lifts his wrists and shows me an old rag wrapped around them. 'Toby has bound my magic and the chains are too thick to break. Lilly, listen, I understand that you are upset with me for the misunderstanding that occurred at the hotel. I assure you, it would never have gone any further and I will never even attempt to behave that way again. I was extremely angry and I lost myself to my temper. And now, with you pregnant, you need all the protection you can get. You need me.'

'That spell. The one you told me to say. I wonder... How long have you known about that?' I make a point of straightening my dress and smoothing down my hair. I lift my gaze and blacken my eyes. 'Tell me.'

'It was in one of the pages you translated from Rebecca Hooper's journal.'

My compulsion and ability to control his words startles him. Controlling actions is one thing, words is another.

'How did you-'

'I'm assuming that it's connected to my Sensativa? The way you kept asking if I could "sense" magic. Am I right?'

He nods and grinds his teeth in response, unable to refuse me.

'That's what Sensativa is, isn't it? I sense magic so I can channel it. If I were to hold onto you and say those words, I would be able to access your connection to the Arcane Realm too. If I was an ordinary witch with no other ability but Sensativa, I could use that spell and access the same magic of the witch I channelled. Am I right?'

His eye twitches before he gives a slight nod. 'According to the

journal, yes.'

'I'll tell you a secret. I know I'm right anyway, because Rebecca Hooper told me that spell at the stone in Dartmoor. Problem was, when I lost access to my magic, I forgot it.' I tut and give the side of my head a little whack. 'Silly brain.' My eyes narrow on him. They're still as black as his soul. 'Now, if you answer my next question in a gentlemanly manner, I'll let you go free, and I won't hurt a single hair on your head. Did you mean what you just said? Were you going to stop your attack? Or did you fully intend on fucking me? The truth now. Not that you have a choice.'

He grunts and fights hard to keep his mouth closed. It's like watching an invisible force pry his lips open. 'I wasn't going to stop. I really, really wanted to fuck you as hard as I could.' His eyes close in defeat and his head rests on the wall.

'Shocker.' I walk further in, my dress trailing behind me. 'A week, Grayson. We've been here a week. And you said nothing of this spell. I could have used it. Toby had his hands on me more than once.'

'You would not have freed me after all I have done. You would have left me behind.'

'Perhaps.'

His eyes land on my belly. 'You are truly with child? An Arcane child?' He whispers the last part to himself in a longing fashion. With a blink, he returns to my face. 'I did not hear clearly what happened next-door. I heard screaming and yelling. Is Hendrix still alive?'

'Yes.'

Loathing contorts his features as he glances to the wall that separates the two cells. 'He must pay.'

'He is paying. And will pay for a while yet. As will Ava. As will your little brother.'

'Where is Toby? If he has fled, you are in danger.' He shifts to his knees and holds out his hands. 'Free me. I swear to you, I will help protect you.'

I laugh. Hard. 'You think *I* need protecting?' I breathe through my hysteria. 'Please. Now I have my magic back, I need no one's help and no one's protection.' I crouch in front of him. 'It is all of you that need protection from me.' I give two short sharp whistles and Tobias joins us in Grayson's cell. The expression on Grayson's face as he looks past me to where his brother lingers, is one I have never seen on him before.

Love.

I stand and step aside, letting them see each other clearly. He observes Tobias's hair and the hazel of his eyes. He takes in the manner in which he holds himself and shrinks away from his surroundings.

‘B-bias?’ Grayson stammers, shuffling closer, still on his knees as that is all the chain holding him will allow. He simply can’t believe his eyes. ‘Bias? You are back? You are *you* once more?’

Grayson is met with silence as Tobias remains silently lost in shock at what he has spent the last few centuries doing. His eyes flick rapidly from left to right as if watching a movie of misery play behind his eyes, and he seems constantly on the verge of tears.

‘You’ll have to excuse him. His memories are trying to organise themselves and he has a lot of cruel memories in there.’

‘Bias? My dear, sweet little brother. Oh... How I have missed you!’ He reaches out his bound wrists to him. ‘Come, please, let me hold you in my arms.’ But Tobias remains by the door. Frustration shimmers behind Grayson’s eyes. ‘Bias, Come. Please.’

‘I will not save you, Grayson,’ Tobias says, lifting his head and allowing his tears to spill forth. ‘What we have done to her and to so many others, we need to pay for that. The things I did...’ His eyes glaze over ‘The things I did... Oh god...’

‘He’s been saying that a lot.’ I add.

‘Bias, brother, you were not yourself. The things you did were not your fault!’

‘And what of the things you did? You were going to rape her!’ Tobias looks disgusted at his brother. ‘You violated her with your hands! You branded her and threatened her friends! You broke her heart and forced your own brother to sleep with a woman he loathed, just to hurt her! And Rose...’ Again, his eyes dart back and forth as if sorting through a ton of information. Then they land back on him. ‘And Kieran... your own son... you tortured him to death!’ Tobias starts to tremble. ‘You are a monstrous man. Just as I am. I took Lilly’s life and contorted into a hideous existence. All the things I did... All the pain I caused...’ He seals shut his eyes, forcing the tears brimming behind them to tumble down his face.

‘Desperate men are forced to do desperate things!’ Grayson insists. ‘I did what I had to do, to save us all! And you, you were Broken, Tobias. You are not held accountable-’

‘I am accountable. As are you. I took Lilly’s life from her. I took her child.’ He glances shamefully at me. ‘Our child. So now, my life is hers. I do as she bids and if my misery brings her one moment of relief or satisfaction then so be it.’ He shakes his head and lowers it once more. ‘And now, whether you accept it or not, your life is hers too.’ Grayson can’t believe what he is hearing. His eyes continue dancing back and forth between us.

‘You have meddled with his mind?’

‘No.’ I shrug. ‘I simply reversed his Break. He is once more Tobias Kendryk. His gentle little soul and generous heart is now filled with

the memory of all the cruelty he has inflicted on others. He will be paying for what he has done for some time.' I point at Grayson. 'As will you.'

'You think this is vengeance? Giving him back his soul?'

'Vengeance is not pain. Or bruises. Or cutting. That's where you men always lack imagination.' I step further into the cell with him and I see how he fights the urge to back up. 'Vengeance is giving someone something that must be lived with forever. Something that they can't, actually, live with. For Hendrix, it is living without his teeth, locked in a dungeon to fester and petrify, knowing every day that his one and only goal in life will never come to pass. He will never make another vampire. His hope for family and love, for acceptance... will never happen. And it is the knowledge that I am the one that took it from him, that will eat at him.' I step closer. 'And as for Ava Sinclair, it was hearing that the man she loved, the man she gave up children and a real family or genuine relationship for, thought nothing of her. I spilt her guts and left her to die slowly, knowing that everything she sacrificed was for nothing. That the man she did everything for and gave everything to, never loved her. That he didn't even like her.' I look back at Tobias. 'I think the word you used was... indifferent?'

Tobias nods. I take another step towards Grayson who remains glued to the spot.

'And now, you-'

'Your eyes are flickering,' he tells me, watching my pupils closely. 'Green and then explosions of lilac. The Break is trying to take hold of you. You must calm yourself. Any more dark deeds, and you may Break for good.' I see the slight glance he gives towards the necklace.

I take it between my fingers and admire the colours swirling wildly inside the crystal. 'If anyone attempts to remove this necklace, Grayson, the spell I placed on it will cause their hearts to stop. Even if they use magic to try and take it, say, with Telekinesis.' I let the Bloodstone fall loose around my neck and lean down to him with possibly the smuggest smile I have ever worn. 'You try and take this stone, you will die. I'm tempted to allow you to try. But then Gabriel will die too. And that is not something I will ever allow to happen.'

'How do you know any such spell?' Grayson demands. 'It wasn't in the pages of the journal.'

'When I performed the spell at the stone, Rebecca filled my head with all her knowledge. I now know everything. I can make it snow.' Delicate white flakes fall from the ceiling. I feel them land on my skin and melt. As the flurry continues, we see our breath in the air. 'I can stand here.' I channel my magic, melding both my Physical, Telekinetic and Energy into one, and with a few words uttered in my mind, I fade from one spot and reappear in another. 'Or I can be here.'

And then I return again to him. 'But sadly, for you, I am right here. And it is time for you to pay.' I hold out the chain that once held me captive to the wall. It writhes and unlinks as the metal morphs and moulds. He watches it warily. 'I have told you what vengeance is. It is taking something away and giving a gift that must be lived with forever. A gift that cannot be lived with. For you, the gift I give is this.' He watches the chain as it continues changing and stiffening. It becomes a rod. The ends twist and bend until they settle and create a word. 'You, Grayson, are about to be branded.'

He scoffs and shakes his head. 'You cannot Brand me. To create a Branding iron takes time. Even if you know how to forge it in the right materials, which is not basic iron such as that by the way, there are rituals that must be completed.'

'I'm an Arcane, Grayson. And I know everything Rebecca Hooper knew. You think I can't forge a Branding iron in a pinch?' I lift the branding iron and rest my lips against its cool surface. I gently breathe on it, muttering a few words in Latin. As I do, I create a slit in my palm, letting my blood seep into its molecular structure. The harsh grey starts to change to various mottled colours, moving just like oil on water. I hold it close and observe my masterpiece with pride. 'That should do it. Now... this is a *real* Branding iron.' I look up at him through my lashes, biting my lip with mischievous glee. 'You wanna see it?'

'Don't you dare bring that thing anywhere near me.'

His chains are wrenched free with a simple flick of my wrist. I lift my hand and he slams backwards into the wall. I hold him there and descend on him slowly as he yells and roars, trying with all his might to get free of my control. I force the restraints around his wrists apart and manoeuvre him into a crucifixion position. The ragged binding spell remains on his wrist as I slowly saunter forwards, admiring the branding iron I have created. I gently blow on it, and the metal glows red hot in an instant.

'Tobias, roll up Grayson's sleeve, would you?'

He shuffles over to his brother with his head bowed low, and does as I have asked without a moment of hesitation. I'm not even using my compulsion. He rolls up Grayson's sleeve as Grayson tries with everything he has to fight him off. To protect himself. He may as well be nailed in position for all the good his efforts do him. When his forearm is bare, Tobias backs away and stays by the door, watching.

'TOBIAS!' Grayson barks. 'YOU STOP HER! YOU STOP HER NOW!'

I laugh and wave the red-hot metal in his face.

'Careful, Grayson. You know, I can brand you anywhere. Doesn't have to be on your arm. You upset me, I may slam this down on your face instead.'

'Please! Bias! I am your brother, God damn it!'

'Not anymore, you're not,' Tobias mutters shamefully.

'Branding me will achieve nothing but weakening our forces. You do this, you will regret it!'

'This is your punishment, Grayson. This is the gift I give you as thanks for all you have done for me. You want power. Not just in terms of magic, but in authority too. You want to be the greatest Coven Leader of all time. You want to have the Arcane as your wife. You want the most powerful children. Well, now you will have no magic. No coven will follow a powerless witch who has treated innocent people the way you have.' I rest my hand over my belly. 'Gabriel will have the Arcane as his wife and we will have an Arcane child. Not you.' I gesture to the glowing metal between us. 'You will have this. You can't cut it off. You can't burn it off. Believe me, I tried. There will just be the cold, lonely reality that you are a powerless witch, alone in a world that hates us. That hates you.'

'You do this, I will kill you. I swear it, Lilly Hooper. Forget the Veil. Forget furthering your bloodline. I will just, plain, kill you!'

I giggle and look at the cut still on my palm. 'You can try.' I slide it along his arm, leaving a thick trail of red on his flesh. When I remove my hand, the cut on it heals. I rest the iron an inch from his skin. 'You have no idea how much I've been wanting to do this.' And with that, I press the rod onto his arm.

Listening to his skin crack and burn and hiss, is almost as melodic as his chorus of screams. His pain and fury mix with wrath as he looks up at the ceiling and yells in utter agony.

Bliss.

A hand reaches out and rests on wrist, pressing the iron harder into his flesh and making his cries even more desperate. Their fingernails are caked in dirt and dried blood. Her delicate wrists are bruised and the skin is rubbed-raw. A deep chill emanates from her touch, sending a shiver throughout my entire body. I glance to my side to see who it is. My Broken-self watches Grayson's suffering with relish, laughing and biting her lip in sick enjoyment. I feel her grip on my wrist tighten and I stagger forwards as she lunges, pressing the searing metal harder onto his arm. With a gasp, I yank back my hand, dropping the iron in the process. It falls to the floor with a clang and returns to its original form of a plain iron chain. My feet scurry back as I hold my wrist close to my chest. I felt her! I felt her touch me and felt the coldness of her body!

'Lilly?' Tobias calls nervously from the door. 'A-are you okay?'

'IS SHE OKAY?' Grayson bellows, panting furiously. 'FUCK HER, TOBIAS! SHE JUST BRANDED ME! I'M FAR FROM FUCKING OKAY!' I can't take my eyes off the girl before me. How is that possible?

Hearing her whispers, seeing her in the corner of my eye, and now feeling her touch. No, it can't be possible!

Tobias steps closer and rests his hand on my shoulder. I flinch and back away, still clutching my hand and feeling the impossible sensation she gave me.

'Lilly... what's wrong?'

'Do you see her?' I whisper, staring at my Broken-self. Her malicious half-grin and the dark intentions behind her eyes make me shudder. And those eyes are firmly on me.

'See who?' Tobias looks around the room. 'There is no one else here but us.'

My eyes blacken and I yell at him, 'DO YOU SEE HER?!'

'I see no other!' he insists. 'Just us three!'

She starts to laugh, a low and devious laugh. She takes a step towards me. I take one back. She takes another, and another, until my back is against the wall and her face is in mine.

'Who do you see? Lilly! Who do you see?' Tobias rushes forwards and stands directly in front of me, clasping my shoulders and giving me a shake.

I drag my eyes away from her lilac ones, and stare into his. 'My Broken-self. I see her, standing there.' I rub my wrist. 'She touched me.'

His face pales.

Behind us, Grayson speaks. 'Her Break is taking her,' he says. 'Any minute now, she'll be gone and we'll be torn to pieces by the creature she has become. Tobias, you must get us away from her! Before it is too late!'

Tobias stays with me, his thoughts racing.

'Lilly, if you Break and kill us, the father of your baby will die too. You *must* let us go!' Grayson starts thrashing against my hold over him. 'You *must*!'

'I will not abandon you.' Tobias takes my face in his hands. 'Take us to Gabriel, Lilly. Take us to the man you love. You know the teleportation spell. I saw you use it. Take us to him and let his love heal the Break before it takes you once more.'

My attention keeps shifting to the mirage of evil who stays perfectly still with her eyes glued to me.

'LILLY! You must listen to me now.'

I pull my focus from her, and nod.

'But I don't know where he is.'

'The Nomad camp,' Tobias tells me. 'He's at the Nomad camp. The same one you visited with Grayson. I've had eyes on him since he arrived there almost a week ago. He went there to look for you. He's told them all exactly what has been going on.' He looks at Grayson.

‘The camp has declared its loyalty to Gabriel and has renounced you entirely. Gabriel is the new Coven Leader and you are to be arrested on sight, and locked up for good.’

Grayson bellows at us both before Tobias turns back to me.

‘From what I have been told by the men that followed my Broken-self, a few have remained loyal to Grayson and abandoned the camp in search of him. Mainly the soldiers. But the civilians have pledged their loyalty to Gabriel. To you and Gabriel both. You hear that?’ He smiles and tries to look encouraging. ‘They love you, Lilly. They’re all looking for you. Let’s go and find them, shall we?’

‘*Because you took us,*’ my Broken-self hisses behind him. ‘*You stole us and locked us up with a chain around our neck. You forced us to watch videos of Ryan attacking us! Raping us! If it wasn’t for you, we would be home, with Gabriel!*’ Her anger contorts her face and the more she speaks, the more I feel her loathing seep into me. He did do those things! She’s right. He touched my body and caressed my flesh as I was forced to watch the years of abuse I suffered play out all around me. Before I realise it, my fingers are around Tobias’s throat and I’m squeezing. His eyes bulge and his skin turns purple. My grip grinds his bones together as I lift him from the floor.

‘You dare touch me,’ I snarl. ‘After everything you have done, you DARE!’

‘Lilly...’ he wheezes. ‘Don’t let her take control. Your eyes are changing.’ He tries to take in air but struggles greatly in succeeding.

‘*He wanted to make us his puppet!*’ My Broken-self snaps venomously in my ear. ‘*He was going to kill our baby!*’

‘And I thank God I didn’t,’ he gasps.

My brow furrows in confusion. ‘You heard her speak?’

He tries to respond, but my hold is too much.

‘You spoke, Lilly,’ Grayson tells me. ‘Those words came from you. From your mouth.’

When I look at him, he jumps as if seeing a snake.

‘Y-your eyes... Your hair...’

The tips are turning white. Slowly, bit by bit. I drop Toby. With a twitch of my hand, Grayson’s collar falls to the floor and his feet return back to the ground. He makes for the door at a sprint.

My eyes turn black. ‘Both of you, come here!’

They have no choice. They both stand beside me and I take their hands. I can’t leave them here to die, or allow them to be free to plot their revenge, so I must take them with me. Transporting us all will require more power than just simply flitting around the room. I channel my powers and let them meld, like mixing a potion with multiple energies. And with some Latin words muttered under my breath and a clear image of where I want to go, I close my eyes and

repeat the words Rebecca implanted in my mind, over and over. First, it's in barely a whisper, but as I get a feel for the words, I become more confident. I began as if I were asking for the power. Now, I'm demanding it.

'Hinc ad amorem meum ibi.' I open my eyes, gripping Grayson and Tobias's hands tightly. *'Hinc ad amorem meum ibi.'* Red lightning emerges from my body and sparks out all around us. *'Hinc ad amorem meum ibi.'* The building begins to tremble as the streaks glow brighter and merge, creating solid lines of red energy. *'Hinc ad amorem meum ibi.'* The lights above us sway back and forth. The lightbulbs glow brighter, and brighter, until they pop and shower us with glass. *'Hinc ad amorem meum ibi.'* My lightning turns white, illuminating the room. It's so piercingly bright, they have to squint against it. Plaster falls from the ceiling. The brick cracks. Water pipes rupture.

'YOU CAN'T RUN FROM YOUR TRUE-SELF, LILLY HOOPER!' she screams at me over the chaos.

Yes, I fucking can! *'HINC AD AMOREM MEUM IBI!'*

The ceiling starts to fall. Everything goes to a blinding white and we're torn from the room, leaving Ava Sinclair and Hendrix Spencer alone, to die, beneath its rubble.

We arrive in the centre of the Nomad camp in a flurry of dirt and wind, all swirling around us like a twister. We shield our eyes from it, and wait for it to settle. As it slows, the scene before us clears.

Part of me wishes that it hadn't.

It's the middle of the night. The stars are out and the moon is full. All around us, cabins are on fire. The flames reach the trees and the smell of petrol hangs thick in the air. Tents are torn to pieces or trampled. And there are bodies on the ground. Tobias has already run to a woman lying close to where the remains of my cabin are still smoldering. He flips her onto her back. Her eyes are lifeless and wide, her throat slit so deep, I see bone. He runs to another, turning over a middle-aged man whose back is littered with bullet holes, and finds a young boy pinned beneath him. The man's sacrifice did not spare the boy. They died embracing each other. Tobias never stops checking, running from corpse... to corpse... to corpse. With each failure to find life, his cries grow more desperate.

'IS ANYONE THERE?' he bellows. Not a single response reaches us. 'HELLO! IS THERE ANOYONE ALIVE OUT THERE?! PLEASE!'

There is no need to run around checking. Everyone here is already dead. Men. Women. Children. All gone. It's the hardest thing to do, but I push my grief for them deep down, knowing that my emotions are already prizing open the Break inside me. I refuse to let my eyes linger on their bodies and focus on the problem at hand. Grayson and I share a look and we both know.

'Hunters have found the Nomads,' I tell him.

He nods, a look of malice in his eyes, but that malice is not for me. Not at this moment.

'But there are not enough bodies to indicate no survivors at all. Either they fled, or were captured.'

Tobias returns to my side and shakes his head. 'Everyone's dead,'

he reports with a strain to his voice. 'No one here is alive.'

Hunters have come to eradicate us all. And they've had a damn good start. So, where have the others gone? Gabriel and Collins are still alive. Or Grayson and Tobias would be dead on the floor. I close my eyes and reach out my hand. My fingers stretch out and feel the air as I channel my Sensativa to their very tips. I feel it search the area around me, but this time, I have the power to force it further afield. It spreads out like a ripple traveling across the surface of a river from a tossed pebble. Out and out it goes, searching for magic.

'They're east of here,' I tell them. 'A couple of miles.' I look into the distance where I feel the ripple meet both Gabriel's and Collins's magic. 'What's East?'

'Woodland,' Tobias replies. 'Really dense woodland. There is a path that leads to a valley and in the base of one of the hills is a tunnel which leads underground. It's a maze in there, but the Nomads know it well and will use it to reach safety.'

A loud roaring approaches. All three of us turn to the sky where a helicopter comes into view. Grayson dives behind a fallen table and Tobias grabs me before dragging me to a large tree where we crouch down using the thick canopy of leaves to shield us from view. It shoots past us at speed, heading east.

'We need to get to them. Quickly.' I take his hand and look for Grayson. 'Come here!'

'Are you insane? I'm not running towards the Hunter's! Not without my magic to defend myself. It would be suicide!'

The roaring returns. The helicopter has turned and come back.

'If there are Hunters in that helicopter, they would have sensed us when they flew over.'

Above us, the helicopter comes into view. It hovers above us, blowing ash and debris in all directions.

'GRAYSON!' My eyes blacken. 'GRAYSON, GET OVER HERE! NOW!'

He sprints across the camp towards us, and the firing starts. Bullets

chase his heels as he runs. I look upwards, my magic converging in my chest. I send out a channeled burst of telekinetic power which hits the helicopter, knocking it sideways. Bullets spray in all directions and alarms beep inside the machine before it starts spiraling out of control. Grayson grabs my hand.

‘HINC AD AMOREM MEUM IBI!’

We leave before the remainder of the camp, and the poor souls that took their last breath here, are consumed in a firebomb and shards of grinding metal.

∞ ∞ ∞

‘Oh. My. God.’ They’re the only words that I can muster when we reappear, but no one other than I heard them though the din. Horror and fear takes the rest of my vocabulary. It also takes my ability to move, never mind that with each passing second, more and more people press into me. I look around with my mouth open and eyes wide. Both Toby’s hand as well as Grayson’s grip mine tighter.

We’ve landed in the middle of a scene of nightmares. Of chaos and fear.

Of death.

We’re in the base of a valley, surrounded either side by two large hills. Hundreds of people are all scrambling and pushing into each other, desperate to get as far away from the hills as possible. The sounds of screaming, yelling, shooting and explosions, echo off the hills and assault my ears as the Nomads around me try desperately to flee. Bodies are pressed together as everyone attempts to find protection. Up on the hills, there are men with guns wearing white porcelain masks. Their bullets rain down on us as they shoot indiscriminately into the crowd below them. The screaming of the women is an unbearable sound as they try and protect their children, who they have huddled in the very middle. The women are protected by the men who have taken position on the outskirts. Some have guns, and are shooting back. But they’re no match against those on the high ground. When they fall, another picks up their gun and takes his place, only to join their fallen comrade moments later.

It takes a moment for me to realise that Toby is shaking me and

yelling into my face.

‘We’re fish in a barrel! Lilly...LILLY! If you stay here, you’ll die! Go... Go and Grayson and I will help them.’

‘Go?’ I whisper.

‘Teleport. We will stay and find Gabriel.’ He points up ahead, in the direction everyone seems to be trying to get to. ‘The tunnel is in that direction. There must be a reason why they are not able to flee. We will stay and try to clear the way for them. We will save as many as we can but you can’t be here, Lilly! You stay and you may be hurt. Or killed.’ His eyes plead with me to listen to his advice. ‘You must save yourself. Save your child!’

Someone slams into my legs and wraps their arms tightly around my knees. I look down and see a little blonde girl hugging me tightly, her whole body shaking as she sobs. I scoop her up in my arms and she clings to me. It’s the little girl I taught to make daisy chains. The blood from my dress has rubbed off on her skin, but there’s not an ounce of fear in her aimed at me. Just relief and a desperate need for comfort.

‘Mummy wouldn’t get up!’ she cries, her little arms clamping around my neck and her tears landing on my skin. ‘She wouldn’t get up, Miss Hooper. She wouldn’t get up!’

‘Where’s your daddy?’ I ask, as calmly as I can, holding her back as firmly as she holds me.

‘The scary mask people took him away, and they hurt my mummy and she wouldn’t get up. She wouldn’t get up!’

I look to my left where Grayson is standing. He shakes his head and slides his finger across his neck while gesturing over his shoulder. Her mother was the dead woman back at camp with her throat slit. I thought I recognised her.

In the mass of faces, I see the flash of lilac eyes. She’s still here. She’s chasing me, waiting for me to let her in.

Never!

I look at the little girl, tears streaming down her innocent little

face, and I do my best to show her a comforting smile.

‘It’s alright. I’m here now. I need to put you down so I can help everyone, okay?’

She nods, and Toby helps to take her from me, handing her to another woman who pins her to her chest.

‘We need to fight. Ready?’ I ask Tobias.

His flames appear on his hand as he nods, but there’s uncertainty in his face. His fire is a normal colour now, but with hints of purple flickering in amongst the yellows and oranges.

‘Can’t you just put up a Mortem wall?’ Grayson demands. ‘I don’t have my magic-’

‘Mortem walls encircle a single witch in a protective barrier. Like the one at the Bloodstone sight on Dartmoor. It’s not big enough to protect everyone and once I make it I can’t leave it or move it!’ If what Rebecca Hooper’s knowledge told me is correct.

‘So?’

‘You’re such a bloody coward.’

‘I wouldn’t be if I had my magic!’

‘How about you do what everyone else here is doing and fight. Like a human.’

A hot sharp pain explodes in my shoulder. Tobias slams his hand down on it hard without a second to spare. Blood seeps through his fingers.

‘I told you it was too dangerous here!’ he snaps.

‘Was I... Did someone just shoot me?’ I lift my head and see a man in amongst the crowd with a gun in his hands and a blood spattered white mask on his face. He’s reloading, his full attention focused on me. I disappear from Tobias and reappear in front of him. ‘You just shot me,’ I snarl, wrapping one hand around his throat and snatching his gun with my other. I squeeze his neck and lift him off the ground. My fire destroys his gun, melting it so it drips through my fingers.

‘You tried to kill me? You dare try to kill me and my baby! YOU DARE!’ As I heal the wound, my fire spreads to him, and his whole body erupts in flames. I keep him held high as he screams in agony, burning alive. Everyone around me backs away.

Someone puts a bullet in the man’s head. I drop him and gasp at my reaction. Not at how I just burned him alive, but how I enjoyed it! How did a Hunter get so deep into the crowd? And then I realise, there are Hunters all around me, dozens of them, killing without discrimination. They use machetes. Knives. Hammers. Guns. The ones I see, I snap their necks with a simple flick of my wrist.

Tobias steps in front of me protectively and raises his hand, a fireball ready to fly at whoever just shot the Hunter.

‘GET AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER!’

‘Jensen?’ I push Tobias out of the way and see him with his weapon raised and ready to fire. Seeing me, he lowers it and rushes forwards. We meet halfway. Jensen engulfs me in his arms and holds me tight. I can feel the love he holds for me resonating out through his embrace. After such an awful ordeal, I cling to him and his affection.

‘I was so afraid,’ he mumbles in my ear. ‘Oh, Buttons, I was so scared. Every second you’ve been gone, I’ve been thinking awful things. Awful, terrible things. But you’re alive! You’re alive and you’re here.’

‘I’m here, Dad. I’m okay,’ I whisper in response, letting my arms furl around him too. ‘I’m so glad you are okay.’

‘Dad?’ he repeats, whispering the words.

‘Yes. Dad.’ I sink into his frame and rest my chin on his shoulder, watching the army descend from on high. ‘You are my dad, and you didn’t abandon me. You lost me. I hate that you let Theo hurt me, but I forgive you,’ I tell him. ‘And I love you, Dad.’

‘I love you too, my darling daughter.’

If we’re to die here, at least I have made peace with Jensen. I have so much hatred and anger in my heart, I must let some go and make room for the good and the light that there is in this world. My Broken-self flickers from sight, and I lose her in the crowd.

Jensen lets me go and holds me at arm's length to survey me.

'Why are you covered in so much blood? Is it yours?'

'No. It's not mine.'

'Your eyes... and your hair... You are Breaking!' He takes a double look at Tobias. 'You took my daughter! WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER?! WHAT DID YOU DO?!'

I hold him back. 'I have it under control. The Break is under control. Where's Gabriel?'

'Up ahead.' He nods beyond my shoulder, keeping half an eye on Tobias and another on my eyes. 'He's trying to clear a path for everyone to get past. Hunters have set off some kind of explosive and the tunnel is blocked by debris. Collins and the men are trying to move the rocks while Gabriel and some others protect them. We're surrounded on all sides, they're attacking from up on the hills. We're not gonna last much longer. The Hunters found my people, the Traitors, three days ago, and started executing them live on television. They have already taken some of the Nomads back to their cells, Lilly. Dozens! They're going to butcher them, just like they did to my people. What do we do?'

'We will fight the Hunters,' Tobias says, 'Go. You must leave here before you get seriously hurt! This chaos is not good for you.' He gestures to my hair. 'The white has spread further. And more lilac has claimed your eyes.'

I can sense Gabriel. Collins too. They're ahead of us, at the front of the group.

'Go!' Tobias encourages. 'Jensen, she must leave. Her Break is-'

'I will not leave these people to die, and run away. I will save myself, *after* I have saved them first!'

'Let her stay,' Grayson scoffs. 'Personally, I'm happy to watch her die.'

As Jensen pulls out his gun, I grab Grayson's elbow; my eyes go black. 'You will fight the Hunters only. You do not harm any Nomads

and you do not run away from me or the fight.'

With a hateful sneer, he nods, turns, and sprints away, searching out the men in masks.

My breathing is shaky.

I'm scared.

Scared for all these people. For my family. For myself and my baby. For my soul.

All around me are wailing children, terrified parents and brave souls willing to die to protect us all.

And surrounding us on all sides are evil, faceless soldiers, desperate to wipe us all out.

Gently and lovingly, I rest my hand over my belly, still feeling the life of my baby flickering inside me.

'I'll keep you safe. I promise.' I look at Jensen and Tobias. Jensen frowns in confusion at my actions. 'We must fight. We cannot let them win. We will not let them win. I will head to the front, towards Gabriel, and help him clear whatever is blocking us all in. You two, help the Nomads. Kill the Hunters who have made it into the crowd.'

'You cannot go alone!' Jensen argues.

'I won't.' I create my fire on my palms and send it to the ground, molding the flames into the forms of my wolves. When one wolf is created, it prowls to the side making room for the next one. The Nomads around me back away, but not through fear. To give me room. Relief spreads through them all as they see me by their side, ready to fight.

Ten wolves made of my crimson-red fire begin to prowl around me, their heads low and their teeth bared in a snarl. My very own pack, each as tall as me and just as fierce as I feel.

'Protect the Nomads and kill the Hunters.' I order my magnificent creatures. 'GO!' Their paws dig into the ground before they bound away, weaving around the Nomads and even leaping clear over their heads.

Three stay with me.

‘Tobias, you take the rear.’ I look to one of the wolves. ‘Keep him alive.’ The wolf snaps its jaws in acknowledgment. ‘Jensen, stay in the centre.’ One of the remaining wolves sits at his heel, ready to protect him.

‘You be safe,’ Jensen tells me, pecking my cheek before running into the crowd. His wolf follows close.

Tobias doesn’t want to go. He doesn’t want to abandon me. My eyes are still black. When I open my mouth to issue my orders, he steps close.

‘I will return to you after. Hold on to your humanity, Lilly Hooper.’ Then he sprints off, his fire ready and raring, my wolf by his side.

More gunfire rains down on us from up on the hillsides.

I lift my hands and stop them all mid-air. Dozens of bullets become suspended mid-flight.

I pull back my arms and then push the bullets away, sending them back to their original owners. I watch as the Hunters atop the hill take bullet after bullet, juddering and dropping their weapons as they die. A loud cheer erupts from the crowd surrounding me. I prepare to leave this place and materialize by Gabriel, but a loud noise stops me. I look up. Two helicopters are descending on us, each with a flamethrower attached to their sides. They hover up high, and point both weapons down to us. The Nomads scream.

‘I don’t think so,’ I threaten in a snarl. I tilt my head back and send out my fire, covering the helicopters in a ferocious funnel of my red flames before they can douse us in theirs. Then I use my magic to send one of the helicopters careering into the other. Their blades grind together and they start spiraling wildly. I reach out with both my hands, and hurtle the flaming wreckages into the crowd of Hunters up on the hillside.

Boom!

The ground trembles at the force of the explosion. I manipulate the fire and spread it out as far as it can go, engulfing the Hunters. They

run and flail their arms, desperately attempting to snub out the flames smothering them.

They can't.

My wolf starts to snarl at me, like I'm a threat.

I'm laughing.

Why am I laughing?

Like a hologram flickering to life, my Broken-self appears before me and wraps her fingers around my throat.

As soon as she touches me with her ice-cold fingers, my emotions explode inside my chest, and everything I have suffered fills me to the brim.

The fear and shame Ryan used to inflict on me.

The panic and dread of Harry's temper.

The loathing I feel for Theo, Grayson and Toby.

The anger I have towards these Hunters.

I scream, a vicious and wrathful scream, that makes the wind around me howl and lightning strike the ground from high above. Red streaks and black ones seek out their targets, and dozens of Hunters who are slaughtering the Nomads with machetes and guns, are struck-down where they stand. I whack her hand away from me, and thrust my palm into her chest. My Broken-self soars backwards, hurtling through the Nomads unseen and not real. I grab my hair and see that the white has spread further. My Broken-self is back on her feet.

'I will not Break,' I promise her, resting my hand on my belly. 'I will not break!'

'You already are Breaking. I am inevitable.'

'You are not real! *HINC AD AMOREM MEUM IBI!*'

I fade from there, and appear in the same whirlwind of dirt and debris at the far end of the group. When the dust settles, I see Collins,

tossing chunks of stone to the side and trying to clear the passageway ahead of him. We share a look for only a second before he runs up to me and hurls his arms around me tight, hugging me and burying his face in my hair. My fingertips dig into his back and I feel his tears land on my neck. He lifts his head and rests his forehead on mine, tears tumbling down his cheeks but a grin on his face.

‘Boy am I glad to see you,’ he laughs.

‘Likewise.’ I stroke his cheek, breathing a sigh of relief.

His fingers take the ends of my hair. ‘Your Break-’

‘Where’s Gabriel?’

‘He saw your fire hit the helicopters and took off towards you.’

‘Connor, Amara, are they-’

‘Digging through the rubble with the others, trying to clear a path. They’re fine.’ He looks over his shoulder, to the blocked tunnel behind him. It’s swarming with Nomads, all desperately hurling lumps of stone and rock out of the way. ‘There’s too much to move.’

‘Get everyone away from the rubble and I will clear it.’ I give him a push towards the tunnel and he runs off, yelling at everyone to get out of the way.

With my wolf by my side, I look behind me, at the Nomads all waiting for the area to be cleared. Tears pour down their faces as they cling to their loved ones. Blood stains their clothing and skin. Some cradle the already dead. My dress is still warm with Ava’s blood, but my appearance is a relief to the Nomads and they ignore the state of me.

Behind them, far back through the valley, their screams start to spread. Louder and louder it becomes. Up on the hill, on the side that wasn’t consumed by my fire, the Hunters are charging. The green grass is barely visible as they run and shoot. Run and shoot.

Fear-filled and terrified faces all turn to me, pleading with me to save them. So many lives are being lost.

‘WE’RE CLEAR!’ Collins yells. I turn and reach out my hand, and

then yank it back, pulling free the tons of rubble and clearing the tunnel. I see Amara and Collins, side by side, their hands gripping each other. Her face lights up when she sees me, but before she can run to me, I turn to the Nomads.

‘GO!’ I bellow. ‘NOW!’

They’re on their feet and rushing towards the tunnel, carrying the injured and the dead. I close my eyes and kneel, resting my palms flat on the ground. I send out my magic, my power over the elements, and I take control of the rubble around me. Huge boulders and chunks of stone start to gather. They build and merge, creating two formidable figures with thick and heavy arms that drag behind them. They groan as they move, and the earth below our feet shakes with every step they take. I stand and face my stone monsters.

‘When the Nomads have passed, use your bodies to seal the entrance. If anyone other than a Nomad attempts to pass, use your arms to kill them.’

They nod their boulder heads and watch the steady flow of people fleeing between them. Something warm trickles down my lip. I wipe it clear and see a trail of blood on the back of my hand.

The magic I am using is taking its toll on my body, despite my physical magic healing me. I know that I am getting weaker. My body is tiring from all that I am doing, and my magic is waning. A river of fleeing men, women, and children separate me from my family. Amara yells something to my wolf before it sprints off into the crowd. Her worried eyes land on me. A pain stabs in my head, like an icepick plunging through my temple. I grab at my skull and moan, fighting the urge to fall to my knees.

‘Gabriel will die,’ she whispers in my ear. ‘Tobias and Grayson could be killed, and then Gabriel will die too. Out there. All alone. Or he could be taken. The Hunters could tie him up and burn him alive for all the world to watch on TV.’

‘Shut up!’

‘Or maybe you will fail here. Maybe you will get caught, and they will watch your belly grow, just to plunge a dagger through it.’

‘Shut up!’

‘What if you’re not strong enough? What if you get them out of here, and fail at the next Bloodstone? Your weakness could trap us all here with the hunter’s mark plague of hatred.’

‘I SAID SHUT UP!’ I scream.

Slowly, Amara kneels in front of me and rests her hand on my back. I lunge forwards, pulling her into my arms. Our embrace is full of love.

‘I’m not strong enough,’ I tell her. ‘So many have died. Too many. I can’t defeat them all. I am a waste of magic. You all deserve a better Arcane than a Broken monster like me.’

‘Gabriel told me about the voice in your head,’ she says calmly, still hugging me. ‘He told me how you saw your Broken-self in the pit at the Bloodstone and I know she is here, trying to take you away from us. I see your hair is almost white. I see the flashes of Lilac in your eyes. But I am not afraid, Honey. I am not afraid.’ She lifts my face. Her sweet smile and trusting eyes are all that I can see. ‘Because you are stronger than the monsters of your past. You are stronger than the nightmares. Than the demons that try to tear you down. And the heartbreak that has torn you up. You are stronger than your doubts, and you are stronger than your fears. There is no one more determined or courageous than you. No one worthier to hold the power of the Arcane than you. You have suffered at the hands of evil, and you will never allow others to suffer as you have. The world has tried and tried and tried to break you, Lilly Hooper. And when it finally succeeded, you pulled your soul back together and sent that Break straight to hell.’ She places her palms on my cheeks and stares into my eyes with a fierceness I have never seen in her before, and an absoluteness that is as unshakable as her loving and loyal heart. ‘It will not win. You will not let it. I will not let it. Do you hear me? You are loved. You are protected. You are wanted and you are needed. Losing you would break so many hearts. So, stay with me. Sister.’ She takes my hand and places it on her belly. ‘Stay with us, auntie.’

‘Amara... You’re pregnant?’ I look at her stomach before lifting my face, a happy smile on my lips and she nods. ‘There must be something in the water.’ I rest my hand on my own belly and she beams from ear to ear, laughing with joy.

‘Well,’ she takes a deep breath. ‘That Break of yours can really fuck

off then.'

'Yeah... it can!'

Once more, we embrace. Her words and devotion fuel my power and my red flames flare up through the ground, right at the base of the hills. It creates a ten metre high barrier between the charging Hunters and the fleeing Nomads. As the Nomads continue funneling through the tunnel, the fire follows them, protecting them from the Hunters and melting anything that travels through. Even bullets.

Collins joins us and reaches down to help me back onto my feet. Connor takes my other arm and helps me steady. They all surround me, so happy that I'm there and in one piece. Behind them, my Broken-self struggles to keep her form, and all the pain she was pulling out of me becomes overwhelmed by the love these people fill me with.

Then, the most beautiful sensation reaches me.

I turn and see my wolf bounding towards me through the crowd.

Right behind it is Gabriel, sprinting towards me.

He has a cut on his forehead and a trail of blood trickling down the side of his face. His eyes widen when he sees me and he slows to a stop. As if my magic obeys my inner most desire, I fade from this spot and appear in front of him without a single word uttered. I've barely materialised when his mouth claims mine in a passionate and demanding kiss. His relief at seeing me alive, and the love he has for me, flows between us. His arm wraps around my back and he pins me to his body, kissing me with everything he has, and I return it all ten-fold. Then, he sinks into my neck, holding me tightly with tears sliding down his cheeks and panting heavily from not only the fight, but despair and relief. Both my arms are around his neck and I feel safe for the first time in so long.

I'm home.

My hair returns to red, and my Broken-self fades entirely right then and there.

'I've been looking everywhere for you. I have never been more relieved than I am right now.' He lifts his face and I wipe his tears.

‘Christ... I’ve been out of my mind with worry. Are you okay? What happened? Where were you?’ His eyes land on my dress. ‘Oh my god! You’re covered in blood!’ He holds me tighter as if scared I’m going to fall and cups my face. ‘Where are you hurt, Beautiful? Sit down. I’ve got you now.’

‘I’m not hurt,’ I assure him, pulling him back into my arms. ‘This blood isn’t mine. Just let me hold you. I missed you so much!’

‘Then who’s blood is it? What happened? Who took you? Grayson? Theo? Toby? Did they hurt you?’ His words tumble from his mouth. His whole body wraps around me protectively and he keeps kissing me over and over. ‘I’ll kill them for this. I’ll kill anyone who put a hand on you I swear to the devil himself!’

I pull back and cup his face in my hands. His tears fall over my thumbs as he plants soft and gentle kisses on my knuckles. I glide my palm over the cut on his head and heal it. ‘I’m okay. I have my Bloodstone back and no one can take it from me again.’

His gaze lowers to the Bloodstone around my neck. And also to my mother’s necklace. He swallows hard and looks anxiously at me.

‘You... you found the chest?’

‘I did.’

‘I can explain-’

‘There’s no need to explain. I remember.’

‘Remember?’

‘I know about the missing six-weeks.’

‘You do?’ he replies weakly.

‘I do.’ I caress his cheek and wipe away his still falling tears. ‘Finding you in that old bar. Our time in the hotel. How we fell in love with each other in that little room and how we planned on being a family. I know Toby took me and made you think I left. But I didn’t. I never would have.’

‘I’m so sorry.’ His eyes close in shame. ‘I should have looked for

you. I thought-'

'You thought I chose Toby. I know. I didn't choose him. I would never choose him over you. Never.'

'I should have told you when I saw you at The Orchard. When Grayson brought you home. I should have-'

'No. You shouldn't have. I wasn't ready to hear any of that back then. I am now.'

'You forgive me?'

'I love you. It wasn't your fault. No more than it was mine. The past is the past. I forgive you, Gabriel. I love you. More than anyone or anything.' I notice the black-gold ring with emerald stones sitting on his wedding finger. I take my hand and slide my fingers between his, letting our rings sit side by side. 'Do you like the ring?'

'I love the ring. I absofuckinglutley love the ring and I absofuckinglutley love you.' He looks down at my blood-stained gown. 'I need to know what happened. Who took you? Which member of my deranged family stole you on our wedding day? And what did they do to you?'

'Gabriel?'

'Yeah?'

'Marry me?'

'What?'

I look up at him and place our hands between us, remembering what he told me about a wiccan ceremony. And I make him my offer.

'Will you take me as your wife? Will you choose me over all others, as I have chosen you for the rest of eternity? When you struggle to see the light at the end of the tunnel, will you let me sit with you in the dark? Will you accept the love in my heart, and keep it safe? Will you allow me to cherish yours in return, with upmost care and devotion? Will you love me forever, Gabriel Kendryk? Will you bind your soul to mine? Because mine has already bound itself to you. And it will never leave you. It is yours, as is my heart, my body, my everything.' My engagement ring starts to glow. The light ebbs out and stretches across

to his finger. It sits there, just above his engagement ring, waiting for his honest acceptance of my offer. 'Will you marry me?'

He lets out a happy sob and beams at me, nodding his head eagerly. 'Yes,' he laughs. 'Yes, I will! I absofuckinglutley will, Lilly Hooper. A million times over and for the rest of time, I will.' The light sinks into his skin and creates a wedding ring in the form of a tattoo, etched onto his skin for the rest of his life.

Now his engagement ring glows, and the light stretches onto my finger. 'Lilly Hooper, will you-'

'Yes!'

'You didn't let me say anything,' he chuckles. Behind him, Connor, Amara and Collins share a laugh at my eagerness. Gabriel takes a deep breath and tries again. 'Lilly Hooper...' He puts a finger to my lips to stop me from butting in. 'I vow to stand shoulder to shoulder with you and help you carry any burden you may bear. I vow to fight for you, even when you struggle to find the strength to fight for yourself. I vow never to leave you. To never stop wanting you. And to never stop believing in you. I vow to protect you. To defend you. To hold you in my arms every night, and hold you in my heart for the rest of time. I vow, Lilly Hooper, that no matter what comes, I will choose you. I will choose your love. Your side. The sky will forever be pink. I will forever be yours. All I ask of you, is will you let me? Will you let me love you, unconditionally, forever, no matter what?'

He watches me, his dark and forever tousled hair hanging over his piercing blue eyes. The corner of his mouth hitches up in that sexy half-smile he looks so good in.

'Absofuckingloutley.'

His magic settles into my skin and the same delicate mark appears on my finger, that sits on his. Our magic links and we feel each other's innermost energy.

'Mrs Kendryk.'

'Mr Kendryk.'

We seal our vows with a kiss, a kiss I never want to end. My fingers slide through his hair and I press my fingertips into his temple.

'Let me show you what happened. It will be quicker than telling you.' His eyes fill with dread. 'It's not pleasant, my love. Just know I'm okay now. Remember that, okay?'

He nods and closes his eyes.

And I show him my week of misery.

He sees my journey in the trunk of the car. Of Hendrix and Grayson taking me into the hotel room. He watches the discovery of the chest and how my memories returned.

He sees me attack Grayson, taking his eye in my frenzied attack.

He sees Grayson assault me.

He learns that Hendrix betrayed us all and watches as Toby takes me. He sees my torment in his cellar and witnesses my escape. He sees me kill Ava. Brand Grayson. And return Tobias to his former self. And he sees how close I came to succumbing to my Break.

When I let him go, he blinks at me, lost for words.

‘Grayson... he...’

‘Yes.’

‘And Toby, those videos...’

‘I know.’

‘Lilly... I am so sorry... I... I...’ He looks down, and he can’t help but smile. ‘Oh my god!’

Yes, I showed him a lot of pain and misery. He witnessed true cruelty and disgusting actions at the hands of his so-called “brothers”.

But I also showed him what helped me get free.

His hands slide down the length of my arms and rests on my belly. He looks down at where they lay and he lets out a single, short, sharp breath.

‘You fixed me?’

‘I did, yeah.’

‘You’re... You’re...’ He lifts his head. ‘We’re pregnant?’ His words are almost pleading? Begging for me to be telling the truth.

‘Yes. We are,’ I laugh, resting my hands over his and nodding. ‘I felt her little heart start to beat a few hours ago and her connection to the Arcane realm is already there. She got us out, Gabriel. She saved us both!’

‘Her.’ He falls to his knees so he’s level with his unborn baby. ‘You think she’s a she?’

‘Oh yeah,’ I nod with certainty. ‘Totally a she.’

‘She,’ he whispers, ‘Yeah. She’s totally a she. Our little girl, already saving her mummy.’

He’s back on his feet and kissing me again. His tears of joy land on my skin. His body presses into mine.

I am truly, truly home.



The Nomads continue funneling in through the tunnel and I heal the mortally wounded as they pass. My fire is still separating us from the Hunters who have no other choice but to remain stuck behind the supernatural flames. Through the crowd, Jensen joins us, rushing to me and giving me a loving hug. I heal his cuts and bruises, despite his attempts at batting my hand away.

‘That wolf of yours...’ He glances over his shoulder to where my wolf lingers. ‘Saved my arse more than once.’

‘Good.’

‘YOU!’ Gabriel roars furiously. ‘YOU FILTHY PIECE OF FUCKING SHIT!’ He’s gone white with fury and he’s off before anyone can stop him. Not that anyone particularly wants to. ‘You tried to rape my pregnant wife?! On my wedding day?!’ he bellows, steaming towards Grayson.

‘He did what?!’ Jensen goes to attack, but I hold him back.

‘This is between them,’ I tell him. ‘And it’s a long time coming. I got my revenge on Grayson for what he did to me. Now, it’s up to Gabriel to decide his brothers fate.’

Connor, Collins and Amara join us.

‘He is the new Coven Leader.’ Collins says. ‘Gabriel needs to set the standard. Everyone knows what Grayson has done now. The Nomads

need to see what happens to men like that.'

Everyone very wisely gets out of Gabriel's path. The passing Nomads slow, and together, we watch the beating Gabriel delivers to his brother. And it's brutal. He delivers punch after punch to his face, his chest, his gut. Grayson's face is bloody and swollen. But Gabriel keeps pulling back his fist to deliver more. No one steps in to help Grayson. Not a single person. And when Grayson falls at Gabriel's feet in a bloody heap, Gabriel stands over him breathing slow and steadily.

'How dare you touch her.'

'It was a m-mistake,' Grayson stutters through his blood-filled mouth. 'It will never happen a-again.'

Gabriel's eyes go black. 'Is that the truth?' he asks. 'If you could, would you try to rape my pregnant wife again?'

'You're pregnant?!' Jensen blurts. 'You got married and you're pregnant?!' His brow is so raised, it's almost disappearing into his hairline. 'I leave you lot for an hour, and I get a son in-law and a grandchild.' His hand grips mine and he shows me a stunned little smile. 'Congrats?'

'Yeah,' I laugh. 'Congrats.'

'WELL?' Gabriel orders.

'YES!' Grayson replies. 'I would, and I would make her suffer every second for what she has done to me! I would carve her up and make her scream!' He cries at his inability to stop his confession.

'Gabriel can compel Grayson's words?' I gasp.

'Yeah,' Amara replies quietly, not taking her eyes off the brothers. 'When you left, he realised his powers were stronger than ever. Connor thinks that when you healed him, you gave his powers a boost too.' She gently nudges me and glances at my belly. 'I mean, you did fix that pesky infertility of his. Guess it's possible you enhanced his link to the Arcane Realm too.'

We all turn, and watch Gabriel.

'You will never change, Grayson. Open your legs.'

Grayson eases them open as he lays sprawled on his back. He watches his brother with fear. Something that suits him remarkably well, I think to myself.

‘Take down your trousers.’

Grayson’s fingers fumble with his flies, but he obeys his brothers command. Gabriel then produces a knife from his jacket pocket and thrusts it into Grayson’s hand.

‘My whole life, you have only ever wanted three things. Those three things have defined you and given you purpose. They’ve turned you into the cruel, evil bastard that now lies at my feet. The first, to be the most powerful coven leader to ever exist. The Nomads have renounced you. They want nothing more to do with you. And now, Lilly has branded you. So that particular dream of yours will never happen. The second, is to be loved. Now everyone sees the real you, and no one will ever love you. And third.’ Gabriel gestures to Grayson’s crotch. ‘To father children with the most powerful bloodline possible. Your obsession with tying Kendryk magic with Arcane power has dominated your entire existence. Now you will never have children.’ Gabriel leans down by Grayson’s head and issues his next order with upmost malice. ‘Put the blade to your balls.’

Slowly, Grayson’s hand slide beneath his boxers. The knife held fast in his hand. They never break eye contact.

‘P-please,’ Grayson whimpers. ‘Don’t do this.’

‘Lilly said those words to you. Remember? When you held her down, and forced your fingers inside her? The woman I love, wearing her wedding dress, and carrying my baby and you! You-’

‘I saved her. T-Toby was going kill that baby. I would never put that child at r-risk.’ He swallows a load of blood so he can carry on pleading. ‘Gabriel... Brother... Please have mercy.’

‘You lost the right to call me Brother a long time ago.’ Gabriel nods to the blade. ‘Cut. Them. Off.’

‘P-please...’

‘Now, Grayson. Cut them off!’

I hear a snip and Grayson seals his mouth shut to stop the agonised scream he produces from being heard across the slowly passing crowd. Thick blood starts seeping from between his legs and his body starts to shake from shock.

‘Put them on the floor,’ Gabriel orders, getting to his feet and pointing at the spot beside Grayson’s head. Grayson does as commanded and places his severed manhood in the dirt, looking at them in utter horror. ‘Now watch, *Brother*.’ Gabriel lifts his head and projects his voice clear across the others. ‘This is what happens to men who rape woman. Who beat them and torture them. Who take their magic and threaten to kill those she loves with death if she dares disobey. This...’ He points at his brother. ‘Is what happens. And if you have a problem with it, I suggest you leave this coven. Does anyone have a problem with it?’

‘No, sir!’ They reply in booming unison as they pass. Gabriel looks down at Grayson. We all head over to join him by his side. I let go of Jensen and slide my hand into his instead.

‘No magic.’ I tell Grayson.

‘No coven.’ Collins says.

Gabriel lifts his boot and stomps it down on Grayson’s testicles. ‘And no children.’

As Grayson’s eyes close, before he falls unconscious, he looks at us all in turn, and warns that he’ll kill us for this.

‘You can try,’ I reply. His eyes close and he falls still at our feet.

Gabriel pulls me into a hug and kisses the top of my head. ‘I should have done that five-hundred years ago,’ he sighs. ‘Are you okay, Beautiful?’

‘I am now I’m here with you.’

‘G-Gabriel?’

Gabriel’s whole body stiffens as he hears Tobias’s nervous voice.

‘If you want to do the same to me, I will lay at your feet willingly.’

Gabriel doesn't even turn.

'I deserve to be punished,' Tobias adds in a shameful whisper, which turns into a swallowed sob. 'I *want* to be punished.'

'Lilly has decided your fate. And if it is ever to change, it will be her decision. Not mine. Your life belongs to her. You may have your soul once more, Toby. But what you have done will never be forgotten or forgiven by me.' He looks over his shoulder to his younger brother. 'You were moments away from taking the life of our unborn child. You took her from me, Toby. Twice. If you ever seek forgiveness, I assure you, you won't find it here. Lilly wants you to know what you have done and live with the guilt for the rest of your life, so that is what you will do. You are dead to me.'

Tobias nods and steps back, looking heartbroken at the floor as tears stream down his cheeks. He has the look of a man who would welcome death. Who longs for the silence and darkness.

He shall never have it.

And now, as I look at him, a completely different man than what he once was, I feel guilty. The cruelty and hatred, the need for vengeance that filled me when my Broken-self got too close, it was all consuming. Is it really this same man's fault? Can he be blamed for the actions of his Broken-self? Tobias lifts his gaze and our eyes meet.

'Are you okay?' he mouths.

I smile at him and nod. It's the first genuine smile I have ever shown Tobias Kendryk and the sadness in his eyes lessens ever so slightly.

Gabriel orders Grayson to be loaded onto a stretcher and guarded closely before we all gather in a circle. The Nomads carry on passing, bowing and giving their thanks as they pass. My wolves still prowl between them, checking they're safe as they descend into the darkness of the tunnel, and lighting their way, guiding them to safety. My flames follow their backs as they retreat into the tunnel, away from the threat of the Hunters. But the Hunters are following the flames closely, slowly sauntering after them so close but unable to reach us. I start walking towards them, through the throng of people. The others all follow.

‘Should we really be heading towards these people?’ Amara asks nervously.

‘I think I need to introduce myself. And ask them where the fuck they have taken our people. You can stay back.’

‘You go, we go,’ she states firmly.

‘How did they find you anyway?’

‘Theo,’ Gabriel mutters, watching me closely with his hand around my waist. I feel how he holds my weight. ‘We shouldn’t be doing this. We need to get you girls away from these men. Neither of you are in any condition to be-’

‘I am not running away from these people!’ Amara bites back. ‘They just murdered my friends and have kidnapped my dad. He may be an arse hole, but if anyone gets to torture and kick his arse, it’s me.’

Gabriel and Collins share a look.

‘Hey, if you two wanted girls that did as they were told, you shouldn’t have chosen two of the feistiest and stubborn girls on the planet.’ Jensen flashes me an affectionate wink, making me laugh.

‘Is Theo here?’ I ask Gabriel, looking up at the hill to my left and then to my right. The explosion from the helicopter crash is still burning bright, but the Hunter numbers remain impressive. ‘I can’t sense him here.’

‘We haven’t seen him. I doubt he would risk his safety by coming here. Which is a sentiment I hold for you as well.’

‘Gabriel...’

‘I’m pretty sure it’s just the Hunters,’ he sighs, giving in to the knowledge that I will not walk away so easily.

We reach the wall of fire and I stop it from moving any further. The last of the Nomads pass us, and I take a moment to heal those who most need it. Afterwards, I stand, and I face the Hunters.

We all do.

Me. Gabriel. Amara. Collins. Connor, and my father. Side by side.

And on the other side of the flames are countless faceless masks, all looking at us. They part, clearing a path for an enormous man almost seven feet tall, wearing a thick, black, leather jacket and heavy military boots. His mask is dirty with small chips around its edges, and on the forehead, are the words “*Never*” written in what I am pretty sure is dried blood. I assume he is their leader. He places himself opposite me.

‘So,’ he sighs, lifting his mask and looking me up and down. There is a large scar trailing from the top left of his forehead, all the way to his jaw on the opposite side. His skin is leathered and tough, with thick stubble covering a heavy jaw. ‘You must be the great Arcane.’

‘Where are the people you have taken?’

He points the gun at my face and fires. The fire destroys the bullet before it can pass and he looks disappointed. Gabriel bristles with anger beside me.

‘You will never get through this wall,’ I tell him. ‘And I could kill you all from exactly where I am. So how about we just try and-’

He starts shooting again. He fires bullet after bullet, all the while looking me in the eye almost bored. He stops.

‘We’re not your enemy. You are victims of a curse. The mark you are branded with, it creates all this hatred you feel and-’

Again, he starts firing. The loud pops from each shot drowns out my words. When I stop talking, he stops shooting.

‘We don’t want a war.’

‘You aren’t gonna get a war, whore.’ He shrugs and starts casually reloading his gun. ‘This is an extermination. You’re gonna get destroyed. We aren’t interested in defeating you. We want you gone. For good. Forever.’ He takes his time loading his chamber. ‘We’re gonna kill your men. We’re gonna kill your women. And we’re gonna kill your kids, too. We’re even gonna kill your dogs, your cats and whatever else any of you have ever touched or looked at in your miserable and disgusting lives.’

‘If you leave us be, we will be no threat to you. Return the people you have taken, and we will walk away.’

He pulls down his mask and points to the word scrawled across it. ‘When the vermin ask for mercy, what do we say?’

The whole crowd surrounding him below one word in unison.

‘NEVER!’

‘When they beg us to spare their lives. What do we say?’

‘NEVER!’

‘And when they dare ask for a truce, what do we say?’

‘NEVER!’ They roar.

He lifts his mask and finds it all so amusing.

He points up on the hill, where several of them stand with cameras. ‘Already got some footage of you lot killing some of us. It’s all been sent to the news stations.’

‘You’re the ones killing us! You’re the ones who attacked us! Kidnapped us!’

‘Humanity’s scared of you.’

‘Because you tell them we’re all monsters.’

‘You’re covered in blood. You tellin’ me you ain’t a monster?’

‘Not right now I’m not,’ I snarl through my teeth. ‘But if you refuse to return the people you have taken, that may change.’

‘You wanna see your fellow scum again? Tune into channel three at eight pm. You can watch their executions live on air. Along with the rest of the world. They’ll see you killing us with your wolves and your fire.’ He looks past me, to the rock monsters guarding the tunnel. ‘And whatever the fuck they are. And when they see all your bodies piled up and burnt, they’ll thank us. And if you choose to stand against us and fight, they’ll hate you even more than they do now. So just lower

this wall of yours and die with a little dignity.'

I step forwards, defiant and absolute. I run my finger along my forehead. 'Never.'

He starts shooting again. Every single time I open my mouth, he pulls the trigger.

'They won't listen to you,' Gabriel says quietly in my ear, guiding me away from the wall and the infuriating man that keeps trying to shoot me in the face. 'They think of us as cockroaches. We're pests and vermin. That's all. Please, believe me when I tell you they will never show us mercy or let us speak of a truce. It's a waste of time and there's no way we could trust any promises they would ever give us. We need to find out where the people they took have been taken, and then we need to leave.'

'We need to kill them.' Jensen argues. 'Those bastards murdered all my people!'

'The only one with the strength to kill them all is Lilly, and such a violent act will only feed the Break inside her.'

'We don't need to kill them. We need to get our people back and hide until I can finish the spell. Once we are gone, the Hunters mark will lose its power. These people are just under its control.' I look at them all, prowling back and forth like starving lions. 'They're under Theo's control. He's the real enemy here. He's the one that wants to wipe us all out so he can do his spell. He's the one responsible for the Hunter's mark and the effect it creates.'

'I'm sorry...' Tobias looks at me with a brow raised. 'What?'

Everyone ignores him.

'I'll get the location of the prisoners and we will save them. And we'll just have to wait it out until the Blood-moon.'

'Okay, Beautiful. We ask, and then we leave with the rest of the Nomads. Don't think I haven't noticed that your nose has been bleeding from all this magic. You need to take care of yourself.' He glares between Amara and I. 'You both do.'

Collins rests his hand on Amara's belly lovingly and she lights up

with joy.

The last of the Nomads have stopped by the entrance of the tunnel. They're all gathered around someone. The stretcher carrying Grayson has been left by the entrance, guarded by two Nomads.

'I'll go see what the problem is,' Collins says, kissing Amara before heading towards them. Connor follows.

'And I'll go and get the location of the prisoners,' Gabriel leans into kiss me.

'I can ask,' I insist.

'Didn't they tell you? I am suddenly very persuasive.' He leans in with his half smile and takes hold of my hips. 'You let me talk to the genocidal maniacs, wife. You just take a breather and focus on growing our daughters nose. Trust me, you have done your duty and then some.'

'Okay,' I concede, kissing him before he leaves. I glance at Jensen and nod for him to go too. He smiles and jogs after Gabriel.

I can't believe it. We're going to leave here together. I'll have my family by my side, and I will complete the spell and secure a safe life not just for my child, but for us all.

Grayson is neutralised.

Tobias is under my control.

Hendrix and Ava are gone.

I have my father back.

I have a husband. I have our child growing inside me.

I have my magic, and I've ensured that I will never lose it again. I am the most powerful person alive and nothing can stop me from saving us all.

I hear a loud and hard slap. I spin round to see Tobias holding his face and Amara raising her hand, ready to deliver another blow.

‘You filthy scum-bag,’ she hisses. ‘You have some nerve even breathing the same air as that girl, let alone looking at her like a pining puppy.’

He lifts his head ever so slightly and she strikes him again, descending on him with a formidable hatred. He cowers back, keeping his face down.

‘Don’t even think about speaking. Don’t you dare. Everything you have done. How can you live with yourself?!’

‘He can’t,’ I tell her, looking at him as he shrinks away. I walk towards them both. Tobias keeps his eyes on the ground, but I see his tears land on the grass by his feet. ‘Tobias?’

Slowly, he lifts his head. He’s barely a husk, utterly consumed with guilt and suffering.

‘I compelled your humanity to return in the hope it would punish the man who did all those things to me. I see now, after almost losing myself to my own Break, that you are not that man. You are innocent-’

‘I am not innocent.’ His words are firm. ‘There were times when I could have returned, Lilly. Times when I felt that I had control.’

‘And you chose not to?’

‘I chose not to,’ he admits. ‘Because I knew what I had done. And I knew I couldn’t live with it.’

‘So, when we were at the barn, and your eyes started to change...’

‘Not then. No.’ He shakes his head adamantly and steps closer. ‘Not then. I was clawing at that monster, desperately trying to get control. I tried so hard... But then Ava started yelling and my Broken-self took over again. His fear of death was unrivaled. The prophecy handed down from my mother has dominated his life.’

‘So, when did you fight the Break, but let it win?’

‘On the first day we kissed,’ he says. ‘On the day, your first told me you loved me. And then once more, when you told me you didn’t. And that you loved Gabriel instead.’

‘Poor you!’ Amara snaps, shoving him in the shoulder and stepping between us. ‘Boo-fucking-hoo. You listen to me, demon, you stay away from her. If you want to try and make it better, you spend your days protecting her, her husband, and their baby. From a distance. Preferably from a different continent.’

‘My life is hers to do with as she wishes. From now until she decides to end it.’

‘Well...alright then.’ She steps back and looks at me, not quite knowing what else to say.

‘Tobias, can you go and see what the problem is over by the tunnel?’ I ask.

With a small bow, he heads over, rubbing his cheek as he goes.

Amara takes my hand.

‘So... whose blood is that on your dress?’

I look over at Gabriel and Jensen who are approaching the flames. ‘Ava’s.’

‘You killed her then?’

‘Amongst other things.’

‘And... Hendrix?’

‘Gone. Currently desiccating slowly after I compelled him to rip out his own teeth.’

‘Jesus...’ she whispers. ‘I kinda wish I’d have been there to see that.’

‘No.’ I look at her and shake my head. ‘You don’t. Trust me.’

She puts on her “It will all be okay” smile, and we return to watching Gabriel. The Hunter-leader slides his finger across his neck and laughs as Gabriel approaches, and then they start firing at the flames once more. No bullets get through. I won’t let them.

But even as they shoot, I notice that the leader keeps glancing

behind Gabriel intermittently. But always in the exact same place.

‘What is he looking at?’

‘Who?’ Amara asks.

‘LILLY?’ Collins calls over. He starts waving for me to join him.

Amara and I head over.

‘So, I was thinking, you know what would be really cool?’

‘What?’

‘If we all live together when this is over. Like... Maybe we could build two cottages next to each other so we can have breakfast together and see each other whenever we wanted. We could share the same garden too. So that our kids can play together whenever they want.’

‘That sounds like an amazing idea.’

‘Yay!’

When we reach the group, there are a dozen Nomads gathered around a man, sitting on the floor. He’s in his late thirties, pale and shaking, and sweating like crazy.

‘He doesn’t seem injured,’ Collins tells me. ‘But he won’t get up and refuses to speak.’

‘What’s your name?’ I ask him, crouching down. He looks into my eyes but his mouth stays closed.

‘His name is Giles.’ One of the women in the crowd says. ‘He’s my husband. I don’t know what’s wrong with him. Since the attack, he’s been like this.’

‘Giles?’ I rest my hand on his forehead. He’s sweating but there’s no fever. ‘Are you hurt?’

He just keeps watching me, his body shaking.

‘If you are unwell, I can heal you. But I need to know what the

problem is.'

Silence.

'Can you at least get up? We need to keep moving, Giles. It's not safe here.' I reach over to help him up. In a surprise move, He wraps his arms around me in a hug. When Collins goes to take him off me, I hold up my hand and stop him. 'It's okay. I think perhaps he's in shock.'

'Giles,' his wife pleads. 'Danny is in the tunnels with my sister. He'll be scared without us.'

'Danny?'

'Our son,' she tells me. 'We sent them on ahead.'

I try to pull back from Giles. But he refuses to let me go. I try again, but no, he will not let me go. He shakes his head and digs his nails into my back.

'OW!' I shove him off and watch as he scrambles back towards me. Collins grabs him and pins him to his chest. He thrashes violently.

Angrily.

'Something's not right. He's not hurt. And he's not in shock.' I rest my hand on his temple, and dive into his mind.

Swiftly, I let go.

'He's human!'

'So?' His wife says, clearly distressed. 'There's no law against marrying a human, is there? We've been together almost ten years. He's one of us.'

'No. No he's not!' I prize my fingers into his mouth, but he has no mouth! It's been sewn shut from behind his lips. He starts beeping, and a red light starts flashing from inside his cheeks. 'Collins, get away from him! Everyone... get away from him! NOW!' Collins lets him go, grabs Amara and rushes back. Tobias has leapt in front of me with his arms wide and started pushing me further and further back. With my magic, I hold Giles in place. 'BOMB!' I shout. Giles is

furiously trying to get to me, reaching out his hands and clawing at the air. His feet slide in the grass but he doesn't get close. I look to Gabriel and Jensen, who have started running back to us.

'What's going on?' Gabriel asks when he reaches me.

'He's a human!'

'Giles? Yeah, he's harmless.'

'He has a bomb sewn into his mouth! He's been affected by the Hunter's mark.'

'He does?' He looks at the raging Giles. 'But, he hasn't come into contact with any Hunters. The Nomads haven't left the camp for weeks. Not since the house blew up. They're thirty miles from civilisation.'

'Tell that to the fucking bomb in his... wait. How many humans are members of the camp?' I look down into the tunnel. The beeping gets quicker. His wife is screaming, pleading for someone to do something. 'Gabriel... How many humans could be in that tunnel with bombs in their mouths?'

'Dozens...' he whispers, horrified.

The beeping suddenly turns into a long, single beep. Giles' eyes widen, and then... BOOM!

He explodes, sending us hurtling through the air. The ferocity of the explosion was immense. I quickly sit and rush to my feet, running towards the tunnel. The ground starts to tremble. A low rumbling echoes into the night. And I watch in horror as the hill starts to collapse. The tunnel disappears and dirt, rock, soil and dust flood outwards.

Giles' wife is screaming in a dire panic, running towards the rubble, screaming her sons name.

I can't believe it! They're all... they're dead! All those people we just herded into that tunnel... gone! Buried alive. Crushed. Obliterated.

Everyone has rushed forwards and started to dig through the rock.

I stand, mouth open and tears falling, stunned into silent agony.

A loud and pain-filled cry fills my ears. Collins is wailing, howling like a dying beast. I run towards him, lifting the hem of my dress and sprinting as hard as I can to where he is kneeling on the floor, cradling someone. Amara's lifeless body comes into focus. Everything slows down. I skid to a stop and fall to my knees beside him, placing my hands on her and channeling my magic into her. I look down at her in Collins' arms. Her head is bloody, and there's a sharp rock protruding from the ground, dripping red.

'She hit her head,' Collins sobs. 'When the bomb exploded... She hit her head!'

I pour my magic into her as soon as I can. I try to heal her. I try and I try. Blood starts to slide down my nose. The others have gathered around us and I scream in the effort to bring her back.

But the life she once had has abandoned her already.

And so has the life she was so excited to tell me about.

Gone.

'No... no... no-no-no-no-NO!' I cry, shaking her as if that will wake her up and bring her back. 'Wakeup! WAKEUP!'

I keep shaking her and shaking her, pouring my power into her body and screaming her name over and over. Tears pour down my face and a pain unlike anything I've ever felt grips my entire body.

Collins' wails are so full of grief. He just holds her in his arms, rocking back and forth. Their hands rest on her belly. He kisses her over and over, crying her name. He sobs it and screams it.

And I can do nothing to help him.

There is no bringing her back.

I can't bring the dead back to life.

Gabriel's in front of me with my face in his hands, telling me to look at him. I do. And what he sees scares him.

Because my pain at losing her, at losing all of our camp when we were so close to freedom, is just too much to bear. And then, in the distance, I hear laughing. Hundreds of people, all the Hunters, they're laughing and clapping, whooping and celebrating their triumph.

I start to breathe harder. Deeper. My tears of grief turn to tears of wrath. My heart starts to race. My head buzzes with the voice I've tried so hard to ignore. But now it's all I can hear.

Amara was pregnant. She was good and sweet and kind. She was a better person than me. Than most. And now she's gone. Her and her baby.

All those people, those children. Gone!

I dematerialise, and appear on the other side of the fire, in front of the leader.

He's doubled over laughing, and only realises I'm there when he lifts his head.

I punch him, right through the chest. My fist goes through his ribcage. His eyes go wide and his mouth opens in a hollow "O". I reach in my second hand and rip the Hunter's chest cavity wide open. He falls at my feet, gurgling in his own blood before I turn to the rest of the Hunters. They raise their guns. I flick my wrist and each of their hands bend back, breaking their bones so they drop their weapons.

'You want a monster?' I snarl. 'I'll show you a fucking monster! Better yet, I'll show you a witch!'

My wolves appear by my side. Seven great big beasts with flaming fur and molten lava falling from their lips. They snarl and bare their teeth at the men around me. Back at the tunnel, the rocks are reforming, and my rock-creatures are storming towards us, stomping hard into the ground as they come to join me.

'Kill the witch!' One of the Hunters orders. 'KILL HER-'

The Hunter doesn't get to finish his order. I reach out my hand and take control of his entire body. He goes rigid. I raise him up high so everyone can see him. And then I break every single one of his bones. Every. Single. One.

Two hundred and six bones snap and I drop him to the floor in a mangled heap.

‘Time to die.’

I unleash hell. The men on the hill all try to kill me.

They shoot. I stop the bullets and drive them through their skulls.

They throw grenades. I send them back.

My fire claims many. My lightening streaks down from the heavens in fierce and relentless streams. It covers many until they fall to the floor, blackened. I walk through them, tearing off limbs and snapping their necks with a twist of my wrist. The land beneath them drags them into the dirt and they breathe it into their lungs as they are swallowed whole. My wolves attack without prejudice or restraints. Their teeth tear at throats and their fire spreads onto flesh as if it’s been doused in petrol. The rock-creatures crush and pulverise, slamming their enormous arms hard into the ground, killing anyone beneath them. The ground runs red with blood. The air is filled with screams as all around me, Hunters die. For those who attempt to flee, I drag them back to me and they perish at my feet in as much pain as I can possibly create. All around me is death. It’s either been and gone, or still claiming its victim. Screams of torment fill the air. I show no mercy. All I show is what the world has shown me.

Evil. Cruelty. Pain.

I reach the top of the hill and stand before a man with a camera. He’s violently shaking but keeps on rolling. Behind me, the hillside is littered with the dead. Hundreds upon hundreds. Down in the valley, the others look on in shock and stunned silence at the carnage they’ve just witnessed.

‘Why are you still filming?’ I ask him, a smile on my lips as he trembles before me. My eyes blacken. ‘Tell me.’

‘I-it’s a live feed. The other Hunters are watching.’

‘Oh.’ I chuckle and take the camera, flipping over the screen so I can see myself. I laugh down its lens, knowing I’m being watched. ‘Hello there. Guess what? I’m coming for you next.’ That’s all I say before dropping it to the floor and killing the cameraman by twisting

his head a full three-sixty degrees. He slumps onto the floor right in front of the lens. He's all the viewers will see now.

I turn back to the others. To Gabriel and Jensen. To Connor. And to Collins who is still cradling his fallen love. A gust of wind blows my ashen hair across my face. One of my wolves starts circling me, nuzzling itself against my skin, but there's no pain at its touch, despite the fierceness of the flame. Its red body is now pure black and its eyes, pure white.

The loss of Amara is buried deep. The suffering I've endured is pushed down somewhere inside me. And Gabriel's desperate pleas for me to stop, go ignored. He tries to pass the fire separating us, but can't.

My dress billows in the wind. The same wind that carries Collins's grief clear through the air.

They will not get away with this. They will pay. They will all pay.

'Lilly. My love! STOP!' Gabriel pleads from down below. I dematerialise from here, and reappear before him. He takes a step towards me, his hands raised in surrender. 'Stop. For the sake of our baby and for the sake of your soul. Stop! Come back to me. Baby... please... don't give up. Don't give in to the Break.'

With a swipe of my hand, Gabriel soars through the air away from me. My eyes narrow on Tobias and my fingers wrap around his throat.

'I'm not done with you, Tobias Kendryk. Not by a long shot.'

'If you go out there alone,' Gabriel calls out, getting to his feet. 'They will come after you. They will try and kill you and our baby!'

'Then I guess I'll just have to kill them first.'

'Don't do this! Don't let the Break take you.'

'Oh, Gabriel...' I look at him and smirk. 'I already have taken her.'

Gabriel's eyes blacken, but before he can speak, both Tobias and I disappear.

End of Volume Two.

Volume Three

The final instalment

Three months later...

The rain hasn't stopped for days. Roads have flooded. Rivers have overflowed. The chaos this has made, only helped with his escape. The road blocks had been suspended, so he walked the countless miles unbothered, and unchecked. All the way to Derry-woods, miles from any towns or main roads, where the basement of an old, partially collapsed house is starting to flood.

Using nothing but an old flash-light, and the brief moments when lightning streaks across the sky, he starts digging through the wreckage. He wears a large duffle coat. His hood covers his face. He walks with a limp, holding his broken ribs with his left hand. He grunts with every bit of movement, but is determined to find what it is he came here for. It took weeks to plan his escape from Gabriel and the Nomads. The leap from the cliff into the sea almost killed him. But he made it, and he's free. But freedom won't last long. Not anymore. Especially with the beacon of magic emanating from him which can be felt by the many hundreds of thousands of Witch Hunters that now openly occupy England.

He slides in through a crack between two wooden support beams, and reaches the entrance hall. The house is in darkness. But these days, darkness is his friend. The world knows his face. What Lilly Hooper - or rather - Lilly Kendryk, left of it. With an annoyed sigh, he pulls out a flash light and turns it on so he can see where he is going. The light flickers as it struggles to get enough power from the old battery inside. With a whack, the beam steadies.

Further in he goes. Through the lounge. Past the kitchen, and towards the door under the stairs. It's still ajar from the last time he

was here. So inside he goes, seeking out that which he desires.

The stairs groan under his weight. The flash light guides the way. Down the steps. Along the corridor. Past the open metal door on his left where his former chains still lie abandoned on the stone floor. He carries on. It is what lies beyond the closed door he seeks.

The metal bolt is still in place, sealing it closed. He pulls it back, and pushes it open.

The stench that pours out burns his nostrils and turns his stomach. The need to vomit overwhelms him, so he buries his mouth and nose in the crook of his arm to shield his senses. He trails the light from his torch across the floor, and finds the source of the smell.

Lying before him are the remains of a woman. Her corpse has festered and rotted. Her shriveled organs trail around her body and bone pokes through the decaying flesh. Even under ground and sealed up, the flies and maggots have discovered her. They buzz around the light. They land on his face. He can't contain the disgusted groan that escapes his lips. He guides the light further across the room, following a trail of blood which has dried and cracked. First, he sees a pair of feet wearing heavy black boots, then legs, until finally, he sees what it is he has come here to find. He walks over, careful to keep the flash light on the vampire's face. He wonders if he is still alive. His skin is mottled and grey. It looks as dry as parchment. Dark black veins cover his features and his eyes stare blankly into the distance.

The hooded figure walks closer and kneels before him. He keeps the light on his face and examines the pale grey of his eyes and thinks how different he looks when they're no longer black.

He nudges the lifeless man's boot.

The eyes dart in his direction, making the hooded man jump.

'You are still alive then. Good,' he says. 'Does it hurt? Slowly petrifying? Feeling your muscles turn to stone and your skin to leather?' He laughs darkly, enjoying the suffering of the man before him. Of the traitor who betrayed him.

The vampire manages a low growl, but fails to move.

'I have a job offer for you.' The hooded man explains.

Another low growl travels through the air.

The hooded man pulls out a flask from his pocket and opens it up. The vampire smells the blood within it instantly and stares at it longingly. The vampire tries to move. To grab the flask. But he's unable to even twitch his fingers, so just whines in frustration instead.

'Look at me, Hendrix.'

Hendrix's eye flick upwards and lands on the hooded figure.

'You betrayed me. Turned against me. Sided with a man who plotted against me. I lost my coven. I lost my brothers. I lost my magic. And I lost my Arcane Witch.'

Hendrix continues looking up at the hooded man, waiting for whatever it is he plans to say or do, and loathing that he is trapped within a stone-cast of his own form.

The hooded man tips a few drops of blood into his mouth. Hendrix feels it slide down his throat, reviving the muscles and flesh it touches instantly. His voice returns, but that is all. He needs more blood if he is to ever move again.

'She took your magic as well as your eye... huh? Branded you?'

Grayson lowers his hood and nods. Hendrix's gaze lingers on the scar covering Grayson's lost eye. He notices the thinning of his face, the thick stubble on his jaw, the dark circles and heavy lines that tell of days of pain and sleepless nights.

'You look like shit, boss.'

'I have been held captive for the last few months by a rather angry and vengeful brother, who took my treatment of his wife rather badly. As well as his extremely loyal coven. What remains of them, at least.'

'His coven...'

'Gabriel now controls the Nomads.'

'And what of Little Witch? Where's she?'

‘While you have been rotting away down here, a lot has changed. Theo is controlling the Hunters in order to destroy every Descendent on the planet. His goal is to perform a spell to return his old mistress back from the dead and to do that, he needs to be the sole recipient of the power from the Arcane realm. Turns out he was the creator of the Hunter Mark, and is responsible for the start of the war.’

‘Damn.’

‘Indeed. There are public executions daily. Descendants are being arrested left, right and centre. The Traitors and the Nomads are as one. Gabriel is in charge of them all, with Jensen Hartley and Collins as his second in command. They fight Hunters, attack executions, save who they can. But Gabriel... he’s changed. It seems that when Lilly healed him, she not only fixed his fertility issue, but amplified his Mental magic. He can control actions, words and thoughts. And for as long as he wishes. Myself included.’

‘And Lilly?’

‘After the death of Amara Jayne, and the slaughter of hundreds of the Nomads, Miss Hooper Broke. She left Gabriel behind, and went on a rampage. Murdered countless Hunters and attacked groups of humans without mercy. She’s looking for Theo, who has gone into hiding. Gabriel’s been trying to catch her ever since she left. Her powers have grown beyond anything anyone could have ever predicted and she carries a baby within her who will hold the same power she does. But Gabriel’s power is strong too. And he wants his wife and his baby back more than anything. Especially as it is coming up to the Blood-moon, and if she fails to perform the second part of the spell, their hope of survival will disappear for good. Rumor has it that last time he faced Lilly, he was able to control her completely. She fled, with the help of Tobias, and no one has seen them since.’

‘And what do you intend to do... huh?’ Hendrix belittles. ‘What are you gonna do against a supreme mind controller who hates ya, and an all-powerful Arcane with no soul that will do far worse than kill ya? Little Witch branded ya. Without your magic... ya can’t fight her. Can’t stop her. Without magic... you’re just a dead man walking. Same as the rest of us.’

‘I may not have my magic. But...’ From his pocket, he pulls out a notebook. ‘I do have this. They’re the translations taken from Rebecca Hooper’s journal. And some of them have been very interesting to

read. I can get power. I can get strength. But I need you to help me.'

'Help you?' Hendrix snorts. 'Look at me.' He flashes his toothless grin. 'The bitch castrated me.'

Grayson flinches at that word and shuffles uncomfortably.

'All I need is vampire venom, this book, and an ally.'

'I'll give you an ally. But I ain't got my venom. Like I said, Little Witch took my teeth.'

From his other pocket, Grayson produces a small metal tin that rattles when he shakes it. Opening the tin, he shows Hendrix the teeth he has within it.

'I can give you back your bite. Your venom. But in return... I want you to give me what you have.'

'What I have? Look at me. I ain't got shit.'

'I want you to turn me into what you are.'

'A vampire?' Hendrix laughs and rolls his eyes. 'She take your senses as well as your magic? I can't turn no one till the Veil is down. And my teeth are in a goddamn box.'

'You don't know?' Grayson asks. 'The spell Lilly is doing will not return magic. They plan to flee this world, and live in The Arcane Realm.'

'Let 'em. Further away from me they are, the better.'

'You think that they can do what they have done to me, and leave for their happy ever after?' Grayson shakes his head. 'That will never happen. I won't let it. I can get you back your bite. And I can work it so you can turn me.' He holds the notebook higher. 'Trust me. I know how.'

'And then what? What do you plan to do exactly? What the fuck can two vampires do in a world where witches and humanity are at war with each other?'

'Revenge,' Grayson says simply.

‘Revenge?’

‘Lilly and Gabriel have taken everything from me. Theo is the reason the war started. The reason my wife and child died five centuries ago. I plan to take what they love most from them. For Theo? His life. And for my brother and his bitch of a wife?’

‘The kid?’

‘I have big plans for that child.’ He holds the notebook higher. ‘World ending, vampire reviving type plans. The witches will not flee and live out their days in safety with free access to their magic while I rot away, crippled and shunned. If I am ever caught again, my days of endless torment will continue. And it is only a matter of time until they figure out how to sever their links to the mortality spell and I am no longer needed to be kept alive.’

‘You know how to sever yourself from your family?’

‘Of course I do. I’ve known for centuries. And Gabriel has been looking for a way to sever us for months. But that link has been my safety net. The only ones who have been able to kill me are the only ones that need me alive. I want to become a vampire. I want to stop their spell and keep the witches in this realm. I want to take their child, Hendrix. Mold it into whatever we want. With an Arcane under our control, we will be unstoppable. And if all else fails, we just kill the fuckers and let the world burn.’ Grayson leans in closer to Hendrix. ‘If we don’t get our happy-ever-after... no one does.’ He lifts the flask to Hendrix’s mouth. ‘Are you in?’

Hendrix laughs. ‘Hell yeah, Boss. I’m in!’

The Last Witch (Volume Three) Coming 2020!

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Thank you.

xx M. J. Lawrie xx